

## SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

### *What Doesn't Play by the Rules*

I come into the room calculating

what I've done,

as if hurt could be measured, as if there was a score system,

as if we could say what I owe in return.

I come into the room ready to apologize, ready to make amends,

ready to tell you all the things I'll do to make it better, but you put your arms around me.

Grace is the ocean that softens the edges.

Grace is rain in the desert— you're not sure whether to laugh, cry, or dance.

Grace is a miracle, all by itself.

In a scorekeeping world, grace doesn't play by the rules.

I come into the room calculating what I've done. You say there's grace here. It feels like a miracle. I don't know whether to laugh, cry, or dance.

It starts and ends with grumbling. It's one of many fascinating words in this passage from Luke. The "Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling" about Jesus. It's not clear that they were grumbling **to** JC as they criticize him for eating with tax collectors and sinners. You can hear the scorn in their claims about "this fellow." And Jesus hears it too so he tells them a story.

To be more accurate, Jesus tells them 3 stories. You may have noticed there are some verses missing here, despite the smooth transition in the jump. I understand why we choose to focus only on this particular story, but when we're trying to figure out what it means for us, we can't forget that Jesus' response to the grumbling was to tell them the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Three stories...same message; it's about prodigal grace. It's about the loving God who wastefully and recklessly finds and forgives us.

Memory is a funny thing. I have this vivid memory of a conversation with my mom. But so many of the details have faded. I know it was sometime in the mid-90s. I can't remember exactly where I was in life – whether I had graduated college yet, whether it was the year after graduation while I was living with her, trying to find a permanent job (which would be ironic given what the conversation was about). Maybe I was already married, but I don't think so.

I remember that we were in the basement of her duplex in Harrisburg. It wasn't a big house, and it was a very... overfull basement that also had the washer and dryer. My mom,

or maybe I, was doing laundry, and, for some reason, that was the moment that I chose to confront her. I have an older brother. He's two years older than me and let's just say that at that particular stage of our lives, he was...frustrating. I'm not going to bash him unfairly and name all his faults in this forum, because every one of us has those moments when perhaps we're a little too self-centered. Through the lens of time, I now know that I was overreacting to whatever the latest "offense" had been.

But I told my mom about it. I remember standing there telling her how angry I was that she kept giving him things he asked for despite his selfishness. I stood there full of self-righteous indignation convinced that he was a selfish jerk who didn't love her as much as I did, that he wasn't living up to his responsibilities to our family.

Does that remind you of anybody you may have heard a story about...recently? I was so incredibly wrong. I was so incredibly confused about how parenthood worked. I may be the younger brother, but I so clearly fell into the trap of the older brother in this story that it's almost comical.

I'm sure I'm not unique in approaching this parable with that particular sympathy for the one who was outside the feast. The beauty of this parable is how easy it is to fall into the trap that Jesus so beautifully sets to make his point. In fact, the whole world has fallen into the trap even in the name we give this story.

We tell it alone, without the other two parables, and we miss the bigger picture of the trio of stories talking about being found while lost. Instead, we latch onto the view of the older brother and label the younger son as prodigal; focusing on his sinful behavior – the sin of squandering what was given. We label the story with what we think is most important – calling out bad behavior. We grumble about whether he should've left his family to begin with. We grumble about how badly he handled his inheritance. We grumble that he was selfish. We grumble that the older brother petulantly refused to join the party, that he wouldn't even acknowledge he had a brother.

And in our grumbling, we keep missing the point. We keep missing the reality that Jesus was offering. This isn't a story about the wasteful lifestyle of a son who tried to grow up too quickly. This isn't a story about which brother was faithful to his father – that's a different parable. This isn't really a story about how we seek forgiveness or how we repent of what we've done wrong.

This is a story about the wasteful extravagance of a father who simply forgives. It's that simple. The father's action is the point. How the father acts in response to his younger son's rejection of him and his family – because asking for your inheritance early is precisely

that: a harsh and untimely rejection. How the father reacts to the sight of his son in the distance, carefully and remorsefully making his way home after failing – whether he truly knew the error of his ways or simply hoped he could find a way to eat regularly. How the father reacts to the other son's denial of family.

The father, the forgiving one, the seeker, the grace-filled parent is the one who teaches us about the God we worship. We don't have to know if the younger son's repentance is genuine. We don't have to know if the older son decides to join the party after Jesus concludes the narrative. We are asked to recognize and trust that the father has always, and will always, seek out his children to offer forgiveness. We are asked to believe that our God acts to find us, claim us, and **forgive** us. Prodigally. Wastefully.

I won't say I understand my brother. I won't say I learned that day why he and I didn't see eye to eye about life. But thirty years later, I know I learned a whole lot about my mom and why she basically told me that I had it all wrong. She nearly quoted the father of this story in telling me that she would continue to do whatever she needed to do to offer love to **my** brother because that's what my brother needed. And that's what a parent does.

The moment I looked into the eyes of my own kids I learned all I needed to know about that kind of love. And every day since, I've hoped to be as loving as she was. Every day since, I see this parable as the story of a God who never stops, who always loves, who always forgives. Always. For me, that's the parable of the lost son and the prodigal parent. Amen.