



AN 8 WEEK DEVOTIONAL COMPANION FOR FPC ATLANTA



SAMARITAN COUNSELING
CENTER OF ATLANTA

INTRODUCTION

We are glad you have found your way to our 2nd Mental Health Devotional Companion supporting a sermon series at FPC Atlanta. Each reflection considers the selected parables from an integrated mental and spiritual health perspective, exploring ways we might receive and practice grace more fully in our lives.

At the Samaritan Counseling Center of Atlanta, I asked several of our team members to consider these 8 parables on Grace and reflect on ways we might be able to integrate our faith journeys and our mental health as we seek to embrace Grace.

As our Counseling Center continues to grow and develop, we invite you to get to know us more. Our clinical team is strong and diverse. It is such a gift and resource to be able to work with clinical psychologists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, licensed professional counselors, and graduate intern therapists all in one place! The therapy we offer is for all people. We are grateful for our clients who choose to work with our team for mental healthcare when they could choose to work with anyone. Many former clients continue to support the work and mission of SCCA and we consider this the highest endorsement! And of course, we remain committed to one of the core parts of our mission: to make mental healthcare accessible to more people, especially those most vulnerable to not being able to access it.

We are also investing in our Spiritual Wellness and wholistic care within communities of faith. We will continue to expand our offerings of small groups, support groups, seminars and retreats. We will continue to expand our offerings of Spiritual Direction and Pastoral Care and Coaching. I have been able to see first-hand this last decade how integral mental health and spiritual health is and I do not take for granted the gift we have in being able to invest in both!

For ways to be connected, I hope you'll reach out:

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*With Grace and Gratitude,
Katie Sundermeier
Executive Director, SCCA*

WHY GRACE

A word from Rev. Dr. Tony Sundermeier

Grace is at the heart of the Gospel, but Jesus rarely explains grace as an abstract idea. Instead, he tells stories. Through parables of banquets and lost things, siblings and servants, laborers and neighbors, Jesus reveals the surprising, searching, welcoming, boundary-crossing, and sometimes offensive nature of God's grace. In this sermon series, we will listen again to some of Jesus' most beloved parables and discover that grace is never merely sentimental. Together, these parables show us that grace is not simply something we receive; it is the very life of God drawing near to us in Jesus Christ. And once grace finds us, it begins to reshape how we see God, ourselves, and our neighbors.

August 2, 2026

Parables of Grace: A Sermon Series

Part 1: The Great Banquet: Grace that Invites Everyone

Luke 14:15-24

August 9, 2026

Parables of Grace: A Sermon Series

Part 2: The Lost Sheep: Grace that Searches

Luke 15:1-7



Online Sermons

For access to Tony's sermons,
please visit the website or follow QR code.

August 16, 2026

Parables of Grace: A Sermon Series

Part 3: The Lost Coin: Grace that Values

Luke 15:8-10

August 23, 2026

Parables of Grace: A Sermon Series

Part 4: The Two Brothers: Grace that Welcomes

Luke 15:11-32

August 30, 2026

Parables of Grace: A Sermon Series

Part 5: The Good Samaritan: Grace that Crosses Boundaries

Luke 10:25-37

September 6, 2026

Parables of Grace: A Sermon Series

Part 6: The Workers in the Vineyard: Grace that Offends

Matthew 20:1-16

September 13, 2026

Parables of Grace: A Sermon Series

Part 7: The Unforgiving Servant: Grace that Must Be Shared

Matthew 18:21-35

September 20, 2026

Parables of Grace: A Sermon Series

Part 8: The Pharisee and Tax Collector: Grace that Justifies

Luke 18:9-14

GRACE THAT INVITES EVERYONE

By Catharina Chang (Earnest), Ph.D., LPC, CPCS

In Luke 14:15–24, Jesus tells the parable of the great banquet. A man prepares a large feast and invites many guests, but when the time comes, those invited begin making excuses. One is focused on work, another on possessions, and another on personal responsibilities. Rather than canceling the banquet, the host tells his servants to go into the streets and invite “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” (Luke 14:21). Even then, there is still room at the table.

I’ve always been drawn to this parable because it reminds me how deeply people want to feel welcomed and valued. I often see how easy it is for people to carry feelings of loneliness, self-doubt, or the sense that they do not quite belong. Sometimes those feelings are never spoken out loud, but they are there nonetheless. What I love about this story is that Jesus makes it clear that God’s invitation is not limited to a select few. The invitation is extended to all people, especially those who have been overlooked, excluded, marginalized, or made to feel unseen. God’s grace reaches people exactly where they are.

I also relate to the guests who made excuses. Life becomes busy. Responsibilities pile up. Without even realizing it, we can become so distracted that we miss opportunities to connect with God and with one another in meaningful ways. The parable reminds us that God’s invitation calls for a response. Grace is freely offered, but we must be willing to make room for God in our lives. What stands out to me most is that the host keeps making room for more people. That is the kind of grace God offers us. As followers of Christ, we are called to reflect that same spirit by helping others feel seen, welcomed, and cared for. Often, it is a small thing like a conversation, a kind word, or simply taking time to listen, that reminds a person that they matter.

This week, reflect on how you can extend God’s invitation of grace to others and notice who may need encouragement or inclusion. The beautiful truth of this parable is that God continues to make room at the table and invites us to do the same.

LOST SHEEP

By Jackson Rainer, Ph.D., Clinical Psychologist

The parable of the lost sheep is a story told by Jesus of a shepherd who leaves his flock of ninety-nine sheep to seek one that is lost. After finding it, he carries it back home and joyfully celebrates.

To be lost is humbling. Illusions of control and self-sufficiency are stripped away, exposing a fragile scaffolding of certainty. When defenseless, something transformative happens: We may become receptive and open, revealing our authentic selves to the world. While daunting and painful, this vulnerability is the essential gateway of a deeper connection to spiritual growth. The 20th century poet, Leonard Cohen, speaks to this paradoxical place of feeling lost in the lyrics of his song Anthem: “Forget your perfect offerings,” he writes, “There is a crack in everything... that’s how the light gets in.”

The light of grace enters through the cracks, through the moments when our defenses collapse and certainties dissolve. When no longer reliant on personal strength, we are open to a spiritual energy that does not originate in us. This is grace, the profound act of the Divine extending kindness and forgiveness, even when it feels unearned and unexpected. It is a spiritual bridge allowing us to release the burden of perfection in order to embrace the beauty of our inherent flaws, frailty, and humanity.

There is a quiet elegance in grace. It rarely arrives with spectacle. Rather, it emerges in small recognitions of unexpected compassion, softening and healing parts of us that have been kept hidden in the shadows. The process breathes with tender humanity. It is through these moments of exposed honesty that we often find our greatest strength and deepest sense of peace. Grace cannot be solicited; it must be received. In its most practical sense, it is the ability to move through painful challenges without becoming cynical or contemptuous.

When lost, shifts in experience remind us, that in our spirituality, grace was never truly gone, it was just waiting for us to notice it again. It is not a reward for endurance but a reminder of our relationship with God. Grace is relational by nature, flowing between the human and the divine, between self and the world, between the broken and the whole. When we rediscover grace, we find the connection revealing the paradox: Grace is never lost. It does not vanish. What is lost is our awareness of it. Even that sense of loss in the ‘dark night of the soul’ is a mysterious part of the journey instructing us to seek, question, surrender, and grow. The longings for grace and to be found become forms of grace itself. It is a presence that persists even when the heart is numb and the mind is restless. When lost, we learn that grace has strength, is unconditional, and is independent of our worthiness or clarity. Grace asks us to look beyond the surface of our experience and discover that it is not something we hold; it is something that holds us. It is the quiet, persistent truth that underlies our wandering, our returning, and everything in between.

WHEN THE LOST THING IS YOU

By Rev. Dr. Carol B. Pitts, Ph.D., LMFT, LPC, CPCS

In this passage, Jesus tells of a woman who loses one of her ten silver coins. She lights a lamp, sweeps the house, searches carefully until she finds it, and then celebrates with her friends.

It isn't hard to imagine being a lost coin. Remember, for a minute, the feeling of being lost. Not broken, but somehow misplaced. Something is off, missing – like something has slipped into a corner that you cannot reach. You're still functioning, showing up, doing what needs to be done. But something essential is out-of-sight. You're feeling not-quite-right, not whole.

Most of us probably know this feeling. It may be emotional numbness. Or maybe it feels like a disconnection from purpose. For some it may be feeling unseen or unnoticed, or feeling lonely even while being surrounded by people. It can be that all-too-familiar sense of “I don't feel like myself.”

The lost coin becomes a symbol for the person who whispers, “I'm here... but I don't feel found.” I'm lost, but I haven't gone anywhere.

In the Parable of the Lost Coin, the coin never wanders away. It doesn't rebel or run. It simply becomes lost within the house—misplaced in familiar surroundings. A coin doesn't lose its worth because it's hidden. It doesn't become valueless because it is covered in dust. Silence doesn't erase its significance. Its worth is unchanged, even when unseen.

This is one of the most healing truths for anyone struggling with such issues as depression, burnout, anxiety, identity confusion, emotional numbness, or spiritual exhaustion. Your worth is not determined by your clarity, energy, or emotional strength. You are worth searching for—even when you feel unreachable.

Jesus uses the woman's actions to reveal God's heart – persistent, in tender pursuit of us. But her actions also mirror healthy inner work.

1. She lights a lamp

This is the moment where gentle awareness replaces self-judgment. It is the moment you name what you're feeling and allow light into the places you avoid. You let truth replace self-criticism. Awareness isn't judgment – it's illumination.

2. She sweeps the house

Sweeping is slow, embodied, repetitive work. This looks like grounding practices, journaling, talking with a therapist or trusted friend, clearing emotional clutter, and making space for rest.

3. She searches carefully

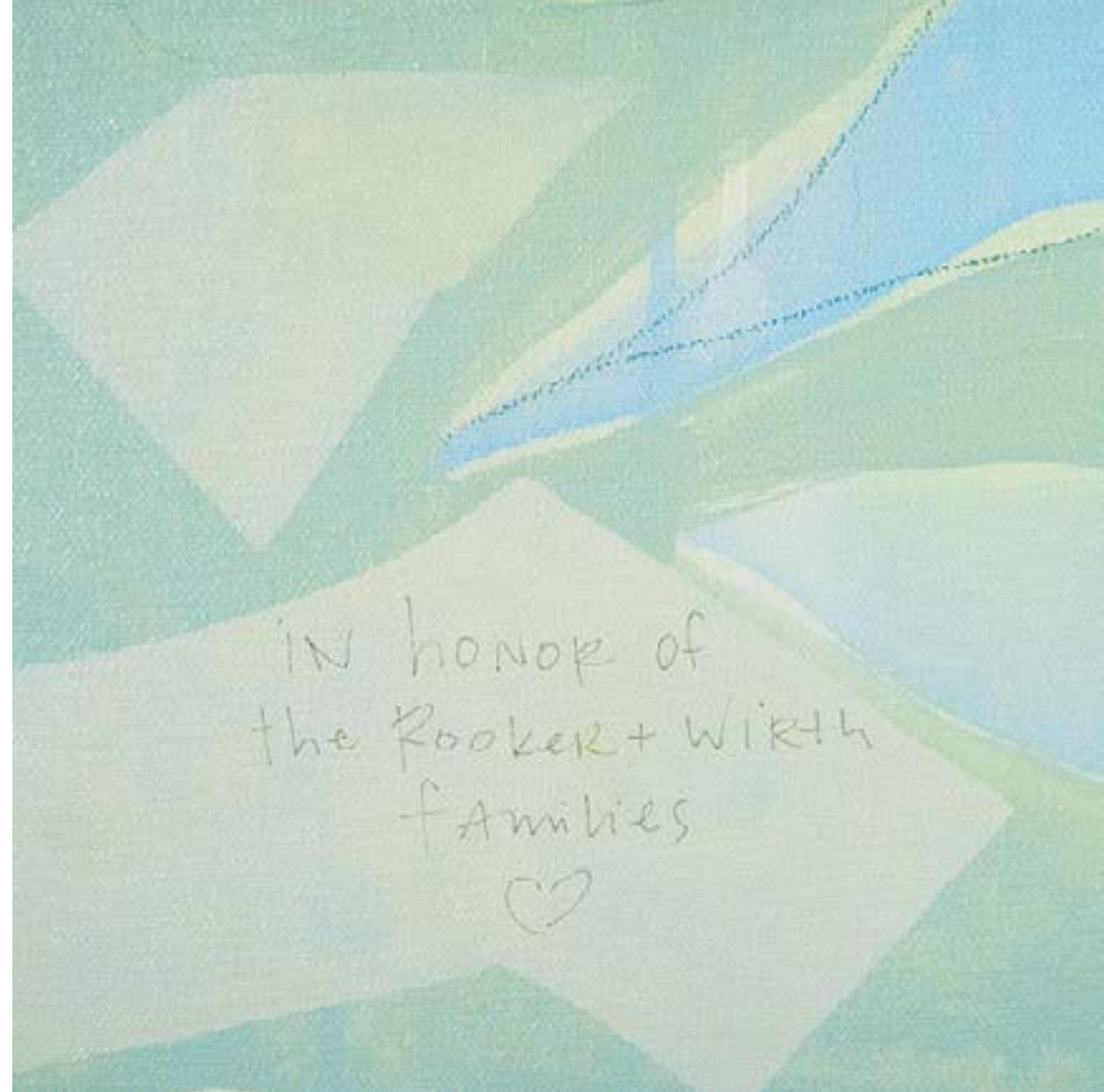
Her search is patient, hopeful, and intentional. This reflects self-compassion, slowing down, staying curious about your inner world, and believing that what has been lost can be found. It is God's posture toward us.

4. She celebrates

When the woman finds the coin, she calls her friends to celebrate. The celebration is not about the coin's performance. It's about its presence. It's about us returning to ourselves - small steps matter, healing is sacred, restoration is communal. And God delights in our return. We don't have to be "fully put together" to bring joy to heaven.

Prayer

God who searches with tenderness, shine your light into the corners of my heart. Sweep away the dust of fear, shame, and exhaustion. Search for me with patience and compassion. Help me believe that I am worth finding. Let your joy meet me as I return to myself and to you. Amen.



THE TWO BROTHERS

By Florida Ellis, DASD, Spiritual Director

Jesus told a story about two brothers, the younger of which asked for his inheritance then took it and squandered it far from home. The older brother remained in his father's household and worked hard.

While destitute and far from home, the younger son remembered life in his father's household where there was food for all and work to do that would be far more dignified than his current occupation: caring for pigs and having nothing to eat. He imagined going home, going home in shame, seeing himself there as a failure and full of sin. He planned his speech carefully. He would say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." He set out, determined to face his shame and own up to his shortcomings. All along the way we can imagine him rehearsing his speech, steeling himself for the recrimination he expected from his father.

Imagine his dread when he saw his father running toward him and then imagine his astonishment when he experienced welcome instead! He expected demotion – no longer a son, but as a hired hand. He expected judgment – but he was welcomed as a beloved son coming home. No mention of his former life – only love, welcome, grace and honor. This younger son was surely surprised by joy.

If someone is convicted in court, prison may be the penalty; but judgment and recrimination also imprison, binding our misdeeds to us. The father in Jesus' story had every reason to judge his son, to impose a penalty for his misjudgment. Instead, the father showered his son with overflowing grace: he embraced and kissed him, dismissed his speech as irrelevant, clothed him with honor, and planned a welcome party!

Initially, the older son chose a harsh response. Did he ever change his mind? We are invited to wonder how we might have reacted. Would we extend welcome and grace, or judgment and distance? In our daily lives, what might love look like? Where can grace flourish?

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

By Susan White, MA, MFA, Therapist

When a legal scholar questions Jesus on how to inherit eternal life, Jesus leads him to scripture: love God and “love your neighbor as your self.” The scholar then asks, “Who is my neighbor?” By way of answer, Jesus tells of a traveling man who had been attacked by robbers, stripped, beaten, and left for dead. A priest passing by averts his eyes and crosses the road, as does a respectable Levite. But a man from Samaria “was moved to pity. He went up and bandaged his wounds, bathing them with oil and wine. Then he lifted him on to his own beast, brought him to an inn, and looked after him there.” (Luke 10: 33-34.)

I once had a client who told me that he used to avoid a cousin with depression because he thought of him as weak. But when he started experiencing depression as well, his attitude changed: “Now I know what he was feeling. Now, I feel so close to him, because I know neither one of us did anything wrong; we both just get depressed.”

So the young man was once like the priest, once like the Levite, hoping that, by averting his eyes, he could distance himself from what he perceived as his cousin’s vulnerability. But once he also experienced depression, he was able to act like the Samaritan and “take pity on the man.”

In Jesus’s time, people from Samaria were shunned, considered outcasts, “unpure.” Some who are shunned perpetuate the cycle by repeating it. It’s where the saying “hurt people hurt people” comes from. But some hurt people turn towards other hurt people with compassion.

What’s at the root of these vastly different responses?

Jesus’s commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” offers a possible answer. Perhaps it was the Samaritan’s knowledge of his own inherent worth and belovedness that allowed him to extend his compassion to someone being similarly mistreated. In the same vein, perhaps the young man I counseled loved himself enough to first seek help for his depression, and later to recognize the invisible arc of connection between himself and his cousin.

When we hate the parts of us that are vulnerable, we often hate the vulnerable parts we see in others. But when we can offer love and compassion to our many parts, we are better equipped to love our neighbors as ourselves.

GRACE THAT OFFENDS

By Anne-Marie Burke, LPC, Therapist

How dare you ask me that, Anne-Marie.” This was my friend’s response when I asked how it felt that her husband remained by her side despite her mistakes and flaws. She couldn’t fathom that level of unconditional love. She believed love must be earned, and when not earned, deserved to be withheld. The suggestion of grace was deeply offensive to her.

Grace offends because it has nothing to do with us. It confronts our deepest belief: that our worth depends on what we produce, achieve, or contribute. We are people of action. We like tangible results and measurable progress. We find our value in *doing*.

But then comes the crisis: the divorce, the death, the diagnosis. The pain becomes so consuming that our former coping mechanisms fail us. Working harder, staying busier, achieving more. None of it dulls the ache anymore. It’s here, at the end of ourselves, where all our striving and muscling and earning finally prove inadequate, that we’re forced to simply *be*. And being doesn’t come naturally to us.

Yet it’s on the far side of this crisis that something breaks inside us. Paradoxically, this is where we finally become useful to God. King David understood this when he wrote in Psalm 51:6, “You desire truth in the innermost being,

and in secret You will make wisdom known to me.” It’s only when we’re broken that our misconceptions of God are finally confronted. We can no longer project onto Him who we want Him to be or accept unexamined what others have told us He is. The illusion that we can sacrifice our way into His favor crumbles. As the psalmist continues in Psalm 51: 16-17, “You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, God, You will not turn away.” Here, in our brokenness, we finally encounter God as He truly is.

Can you sit quietly with yourself for an extended period and receive the unearned gift of God’s love without jumping up to busy yourself? If you can, you’ve encountered the great and terrible pleasure of God’s offensive grace.

Grace is offensive because it reveals a truth we resist: God’s love is not created. God’s love simply *is*. “I Am That I Am,” God declares. This love cannot be earned. It cannot be diminished by our failures or amplified by our achievements. Grace de-centers all that once conferred our value—our productivity, our usefulness, our careful management of life—and centers our awareness on God’s nature, which is love itself.

When Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, my burden is light,” he’s not offering a productivity hack. He’s inviting us into a radical reorientation: stop trying to earn your worth. It is already conferred because you are God’s child, created to enjoy the love that has always existed.

Here’s the greater paradox: the grace so freely given when we stop earning our place now frees us to contribute authentically. This is the process Jesus invites us into: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” It’s a “being” that leads to “becoming.” Not through our striving but through our receiving.

God's light shines through us while simultaneously having nothing to do with our merit. Our work becomes not an attempt to secure love but an overflow of love already received. We're no longer fueled by the need for external validation but by the internal reality of being deeply, unchangeably loved.

This is the scandal of grace. It confronts our pride, dismantles our self-sufficiency, and dethrones our productivity as the measure of our worth. And yet, in that offense, we find the most liberating truth of all: we are loved not for what we do, but for *whose* we are.

"Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden," Jesus beckons. Follow me into this offensive, outrageous, unearned grace. And once you've tasted this irresistible gift, tell someone else.



GRACE THAT MUST BE SHARED

By Joy Li Yue, MA, LAPC, Therapist

When I first encountered this parable, I found it challenging. The idea of the servant receiving forgiveness from the king sounded wonderful (what a generous king, and what a relief for the servant to be freed from the crushing weight of his debts!). Yet the cautionary tale in the latter half of the parable, and Jesus' direct command that we must forgive our brothers and sisters likewise, is a much tougher pill to swallow.

Forgiveness sounds great until we are the ones who have been wronged and the pain is deeply personal. In our mental health practice, we have the privilege of hearing some of our clients' most heartbreaking and traumatic stories. We are regularly reminded that the world is not as it should be. How could human beings do so much harm to one another? When we sit with those who have been deeply wounded, or when we are wounded ourselves, how do we think about forgiveness? How do we reconcile Jesus' message with the realities of life?

Psychologists broadly define forgiveness as a conscious, deliberate choice to release resentment or vengeance toward someone who has harmed you, regardless of whether they deserve it. Importantly, forgiveness is distinct from:

- **Condoning:** excusing or minimizing the harm that was done
- **Forgetting:** erasing the memory of what happened

- **Reconciliation:** restoring the relationship (forgiveness can coexist with healthy and wise boundaries)

Forgiveness is primarily an act of release and letting go. When we forgive, we let go of resentment, anger, and bitterness, allowing ourselves to be set free. By contrast, unforgiveness keeps our bodies and minds in a chronic state of distress. While it can feel like a way of holding someone accountable, it often ends up holding us captive instead. It keeps our wounds open, keeps the past alive in the present, and binds us to the very person who caused us pain. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that forgiveness has been linked to numerous physical and mental health benefits, including lower blood pressure, reduced risk of heart disease, better immune function, less depression and anxiety, and greater self-esteem and hope.

Yet knowing the benefits of forgiveness does not make it easy. For those who have experienced profound trauma or abuse, forgiveness may feel impossible or out of reach. The good news is that the path of forgiveness is not one we walk alone. In the Trinity, we find hope and the resources for this difficult work. Jesus is not distant from our pain but understands firsthand what it means to be betrayed, rejected, and wronged. The Holy Spirit gives us the strength to release resentment and bitterness. And because the Father is perfectly loving and just, we can surrender every wrong to Him, trusting that He sees what has been done and will one day make all things right.

Perhaps this is Jesus' invitation in this parable: not to deny the reality of our wounds, but to entrust them to the One who has forgiven us and given us immeasurable grace. As we do, we discover that forgiveness is not simply a gift we receive; it is a grace that must be shared.

GRACE THAT JUSTIFIES

By Rev. Dr. Katie Sundermeier, Executive Director

This parable was shared for “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” Let’s first try to apply the parable from this standpoint.

The Pharisee, a religious leader, thanks God that he is not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even tax collectors. He praises himself for what he does, including fasting and tithing ten percent of his income. The tax collector, who was often not trusted because tax collectors could take money for themselves while collecting taxes for Rome, humbles himself and prays to God for mercy.

When we get caught up in how right or righteous we are, we are not able to see our own need for humility and mercy. We also lose the capacity to truly see the other.

And yet, we know what it is like to be in a relationship or within a community where there is a lack of accountability or consequences for harmful behavior. The hope is that the tax collector not only showed up with humility before God and asked for mercy, but that he also changed his ways.

In my work within communities of faith and other organizations, I have seen that when we get the first focus right—humility and mercy within ourselves and toward others—we are better able to live into the essential practice of creating, nurturing, and protecting cultures of justice and right living. Jesus is clear in the telling of this parable about whom it is intended for and from what perspective. The order matters: How do we begin with humility, seeking God’s grace and mercy? Then, how do we live our lives differently, changed by God’s grace and mercy?

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Katherine Wirth, FPC Atlanta church member and artist, donated this piece to SCCA in honor of the Rooker and Wirth families. To learn more about Katherine's work visit katherinewirthart.com



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