

April 3, 2022 Fifth Sunday in Lent

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

"A Rorschach Test of Grace"

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A man walks into a therapist's office and sits down. The therapist says, "I would like to try an exercise so I can begin to get to know you. I will show you a series of inkblot drawings and I want you to tell me what they represent to you." The therapist reveals the first drawing and says, "Tell me what you see." The man responds, "Two people making love." The therapist reveals the second drawing and asks, "What do you see?" The man responds, "Two people making love." The therapist reveals the third drawing and gets the same response, "Two people making love." The therapist says "It appears you have an obsession with lovemaking." And the man replies, "Doc, you are the one with all of the dirty pictures."

All kidding and old jokes aside, the infamous Rorschach test can reveal something about ourselves and how we see the world. And this parable from the gospel of Luke can be revealing about us and how we view the world.

Although nowhere does Jesus state this when we hear this story we tend to assume that God is the father. And then we tend to place ourselves as either the hardworking son who never shirks their responsibilities or the prodigal son who squanders his father's money and only returns when he has no place else to go.

With whom we associate tells us something about ourselves,

whether we see ourselves as the diligent, always do what you are told type who might be a little judgmental of others or the devil-may-care type who has made their share of mistakes in this life and is hoping to be forgiven. Presbyterians with their protestant work ethic are much more likely to see themselves as the older brother. We struggle with this story and wonder why the younger brother is getting all the father's attention.

The risk of parables is that we seek to understand them as morality plays. We want them to be a single strict analogy from which we can learn a specific lesson. We want to identify definitively who God is in the story, who we are, and what we are concretely supposed to do. But in reality parables are more elastic and multivalent than that. They want us to think a bit harder. In the great tradition of Jewish midrash parables can be heard and understood in a variety of ways. This allows for stories to have more than one meaning and speak to more than one truth.

So what if we picture ourselves as the father? What if we were called to live our lives the way the father chose to live his life? We have a son who comes to us and in outlandish temerity requests his inheritance immediately. And upon receiving it abandons us and our family. This son is pretty much leaving us for dead. Then, one day, as we are standing out by the road we spot this wastrel of a son, now dressed in rags and clearly having spent his every last penny. He is making his way home. What will we do? Will we turn on our heel, go back in our house and lock the door? Will we stand there stone-faced and wait to see how much this betrayer will grovel and plead and confess their sins? Well this father does neither of those things. Instead, "he ran and put his arms around him and kissed

him." Before the prodigal son can offer any form of contrition he is bathed in the love of his father.

Soon a grand and extravagant party is under way. When the older son gets angry and refuses to join us, what will we do? Will we remind him that we are in charge and if we decide to forgive the younger son than he should just get over it? Will we tell him that if he wants to be stubborn he can just skip the party, more food and drink for the rest of us? Well this father tells him "all that is mine is yours."

Now I am not suggesting that this parable is a guidebook for parenting. I think we all know that this parable is a window into the nature of grace. But we tend to think of grace in terms of what God offers to us. However we are called to respond to grace as well. One of the ways we respond is by expressing our gratitude to God who is the creator of all grace. But we are also called to be a reflection of that grace. Grace certainly shapes how we see our God but when we fully receive God's grace it also shapes how we see everyone and the entire world.

When we hear in the story that the father is standing there peering into the distance when the son comes around the bend in the road, we know this is not happenstance. The coincidence seems highly unlikely. What is more likely is that the father has spent countless days watching the horizon, praying for a glimpse of his lost son. The father is eager and determined to offer forgiveness and reconciliation. He could have spent his days consumed with anger at what he has lost, consumed by how unfairly he had been treated. But instead he watches for an opportunity to see what can be gained by generosity and forgiveness.

How does he do it? With so many reasons to be angry and aggrieved how does he keep pouring out generosity and forgiveness into the world and onto those around him? I think now is when we circle back to our silly little Rorschach test joke. The perspective we bring to the world will shape our view of everything and shape our actions in the world.

If we view our existence in terms of what is owed to us, it is nearly impossible to not feel as if we have been cheated in some way. After all we work hard, we do our best to love the people in our lives, we try to be a good person and yet inevitably we find ourselves disappointed in one way or another.

The writer Rebecca Solnit wrote, "We are all the heroes of our own stories..." And we know that heroes always give more than they get. This means we all tend to believe we are entitled to more than we have, more love, more loyalty, more attention. You name it, we are entitled to it. Every Rorschach drawing shows us how much more we deserve from everyone and everything.

However, if we take a step back and recognize the grace God has given to us, so abundantly, so absurdly, it is not we who are the heroes of our own stories, it is God. If we imagine what we have given of ourselves on one side of one of those old-fashioned balancing scales and what we have received on the other side, the receiving side is exponentially more substantial. In light of God's grace given to us, there is no way we can ever be more generous, or more forgiving, than what we have already received. This means when we view all of our interactions, each and every one of them are an opportunity to demonstrate the generosity and forgiveness we have already abundantly been given.

I wonder if that father in the story thought about life in that way. I wonder if he was so grateful for all he had received in this life that he could not help himself but to be generous and forgiving beyond what anyone would expect.

The current zeitgeist of our world does not reflect generosity and forgiveness. We find ourselves living in a society in which a vision of a zero sum game persists. Frustration and anxiety are in the air. Politically and socially we scrap over territory, wrestling over every inch. Every difference of opinion becomes a win/lose contest. I fear we are living in a time with too much entitlement on our minds and not enough gratitude and forgiveness in our hearts.

There is a painting by Thomas Hart Benton of the prodigal son. It shows him having returned from his wanderings. Except the farm before him has fallen into disrepair and abandonment. He has returned home too late. His family and any hope of reconciliation are long gone. This is the risk of the path of entitlement. This is the risk I worry about for our world. If we wait too long to find our way back to each other could it be too late?

I wonder, if we all could be grateful for all the grace we have received from our God; if we might fill the air around us with more generosity and forgiveness; if we might celebrate the gift of being children of God together; if we might not make the world a better place. Every inkblot bears the imprint of the grace of God, as does every one of our lives if we are only wise enough to see it. I wonder.

Thanks be to God. Amen.