

“Let Love Be Your Greatest Aim”
Exodus 3:7, 1 John 4:8, Luke 15:11-32
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Rev. Jeong Park
Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

This morning, I am going to talk about two things: God is love and why this love really matters to us. Within our Christian tradition, theologians and philosophers have strived to prove the existence of God. But I understand that people don't come to faith in Christ because of our superior theological argument. They come to faith in Christ because somebody cares about them. We have a deep need for care. We all desire to receive unconditional love. The purpose of Jesus' whole ministry and his entire life is to proclaim the love of God and to build the Kingdom of God based on this solid foundation. Christianity is all about love. We Christians often say that God is Love. How can we REALLY understand the love of God in our life?

The conviction that God is love runs through the whole Bible. Let's first look at our Old Testament reading. The Scripture reading describes that a loving God hears the cry of his people in slavery and delivers them through the leadership of Moses. The God that we believe in is compassionate and caring for his people. Our God is not indifferent to our suffering. The Exodus from slavery in Egypt was a defining moment for the Israelites. The Passover recalls God's miraculous actions to save them. The experience of Exodus and Passover among the Israelites was a powerful experience of God's love to be with them in their difficult times. In our New Testament reading, 1 John 4:8 reminds us of God's very being as love. In the second New Testament reading, Jesus gives us a powerful illustration of God's love. This is one of most beautiful stories of grace and divine acceptance in the Bible. I want to give you clarification about two words: God's love and Grace. Grace and love are like two sides of the same coin. When we receive God's love, we experience God's grace.

Let's review the parable of the prodigal son. There was a man who had two sons in our story. One day, the younger son asked his father, "Give me my share of the inheritance." And then, he packed his bags and left for a distant country. After he spent everything, he began to be in need. He found a job to feed pigs. He was so hungry, but no one would give him any. When he decided to go home to his father, he told his father, "Father I've sinned against God. I've sinned before you. I don't deserve to be called your son ever again." But surprisingly, the father wasn't listening. Rather, he called to the servants saying, "Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then kill a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We're going to

feast!” Does it make sense to us? The older son became so angry about his father’s response to the younger son. The older brother strongly challenged his father saying, “Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!” Why would the father welcome his younger son back even as the older brother is objecting? There is huge tension and conflict between the father and the old son. The key concerns are immorality and unfairness. The father should be fair to his sons, but he didn’t do that, but welcomed the younger son.

What’s the point of this parable? When we read this story, we need to be careful to make an assumption: When we highlight the prodigal son on his comeback, we miss the point. When we just focus on the father’s exciting welcome, we still misunderstand this story. Think about a situation. If you were the father of two sons, you must have struggled to make a good decision. You had to deal with the younger son’s immorality against you and the older son’s strong anger to welcome his brother back. Nevertheless, the father made a final decision to welcome the younger son’s return no matter what. What made this action possible? It was the father’s courageous forgiveness and radical acceptance. This is the essence of God’s love for us. When we miss the anguish of the father’s heart, the surprise party to welcome the second son and joy of the return are not genuine and authentic.

This is the true meaning of grace paid by our God’s love! Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, mentions cheap grace and costly Grace. Listen to his words:

“Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”

Let’s go back to our story again. Just imagine that there was no father when the younger son headed home in the later part of the story. What would happen to the younger son? Thomas G. Long, a theologian and pastor in his

article, *Surprise Party* challenges us that this story ought to end with the younger son sweating in the furrows, eating in the slave quarters and spending his days serving his older brother. So if we prodigals see the father running in our direction with open arms, we should know in our souls that this as an event so unexpected, so undeserved, so out of joint with all that life should bring us, that we fall down in awe before this joyful mystery. Long makes this point to share his experience: A student went jogging with his father in their urban neighborhood. As they ran, the son shared what he was learning in seminary about urban ministry, and the father, an inner city pastor, related experiences of his own. At the halfway point of their jog, they decided to phone ahead for a home-delivered pizza. As they headed for the phone, however, a homeless man approached them, asking for spare change. The father reached into the pockets of his sweat pants and pulled out two handfuls of coins. "Here," he said to the homeless man. "Take what you need." The homeless man, hardly believing his good fortune, said, "I'll take it all," scooped the coins into his own hands, and went on his way. It only took a second for the father to realize that he now had no change for the phone. "Pardon me," he beckoned to the homeless man. "I need to make a call. Can you spare some change?" The homeless man held out the two handfuls of coins. "Here," he said. "Take what you need."

The story of the prodigal son and this illustration remind us that we are all homeless prodigals and beggars. When we come home, we expect nothing, but surprisingly God welcomes us in His radical acceptance. This is God's love and this is grace- a new relationship with God. Let love be your greatest aim. That is, pursue love: First, receive God's love, radical acceptance in your heart and go after a life of love. Amen.