

Sermon on Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
CCRC, 27 March 2022
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The Texture of Grace

Dear Friends of God,

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One of the layers or textures of Lent that inspires us today is the robe on the shoulders of the younger son who had finally come home.

Imagine that robe: fine linen, beautifully embroidered, and colourful. It feels light yet substantial, smooth and textured. It is the robe of a wealthy land-owner and prominent businessman. When the father calls for it, he calls for

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“the best robe”

Clearly it's the father's own robe, because who else would wear the best robe in the house? This is the robe the father wore to grand occasions and festivals. This is the one he commissioned Giorgio Armani to make out of the best material. If you would meet the father when he was wearing this beautiful robe you'd know this is a man of standing in the community. He'd walk past you and you'd nod your head in respect to one of your betters. If the grand occasion was at his house, you would know that he is the one throwing the party and you would honour him. You would sense his authority. He would look grand and twice as handsome in that robe.

That robe on the younger son does not really make sense to us.

This younger son should not have been wearing this robe. This son had caused so much shame on himself, his father and his community, that he should not even have been let into the same room as that robe. He shouldn't even be able to see his father in it, let alone wear it along with a getting the signet ring, sandals, the fatted calf and a blowout party. How is it possible that he is wearing that robe?

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By the time he had come home he had caused no end of shame in his family. In that shame-based culture, he stands out as the poster-child for shame. It's like he had studied all the ways to heap up shame and then exhausted all those ways to shame his father, his community and himself. In the few sentences of this parable, Jesus has people gasping at how utterly shameful this son had been.

To start with, the son had said to his father,

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Father, give me my share of the inheritance.

That was a shocking statement, utterly shameful shame. A son does not say that to his father. It's as if he were saying,

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Father, I wish you were dead.

This tells us something about the nature of sin. Sin isn't the breaking of rules. It's the breaking of a relationship. Yes, Adam and Eve broke the rules God had set. But most of all, they broke a relationship of trust and mutuality. Here the relationship is broken in no uncertain terms. And he breaks his father's heart.

In the Middle Eastern culture of the time, such a rebellious son would be beaten. Maybe even stoned to death by the community for such a scandalous breaking of community values. But the father responded in an equally shocking way. He gave what his son asked. The depth of his love allows freedom. Freedom to go the other way. Freedom to reject and try to make it on your own.

The son had gathered together his property, which amounted to 1/3 of his father's estate, because the eldest son would inherit a double portion, so 2/3. Where do you think he liquidated 33% of his father's assets? In the local market. In public. He would have taken his father's sheep and goats and sold them to the vendors there. The vendors would know where these animals came from. Everyone would know the scandalous way the son was treating his father. They would be disgusted, and heap shame on the son. And they would heap shame on the father for allowing this to happen. The son would have to leave town fast for his own safety.

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The shame just keeps piling up. We find out that he went to a foreign land and squandered all of his wealth. Partying with the gentiles soon left him with nothing. When the high times ended and a drought came upon the land he then hired himself out to a local gentile farmer who sent him to tend pigs. This Jewish boy had plunged so low that he was not only willing to tend pigs, he longed to eat the pig's food.

There is no end to the shame here. Jesus' listeners would be wincing like someone was running his fingernails down a chalkboard. You could not imagine more shame. This son was unworthy in every way imaginable. There is no good news with this son. Everything he has done has caused brokenness—broken relationships, broken family, broken covenant, broken hearts and spirits.

You have to remember that Jesus is telling this parable in response to the Pharisees, who were outraged that at what they deemed to be shameful acts of Jesus.

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Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus was hanging around tax-collectors and sinners. These were the lowest of the low. They were the collaborators with the enemy who occupied their land. It was shameful just to acknowledge their presence.

The Pharisees called these people “sinners.” These “sinners” had flocked to Jesus. In him they found acceptance and truth. They found in him a teacher who was not ashamed to be with them and who helped them grow spiritually.

But the Pharisees thought it was scandalous that Jesus received them. Not only did he talk to them and receive them into his fellowship, he even ate with them. In Middle Eastern culture, to eat with someone is not like here. Here we casually eat with someone, we chat and we go our way. But there, to eat with someone was to express total acceptance of that person.

And so the question the gallery was asking was, “Does Jesus have no shame?” How could a teacher from God do such a thing?

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Jesus heightens the scandal with this story of shame. Jesus knew they were asking these questions and so he painted this picture of unrelenting shame.

Turns out, sin is not about rule breaking. Sin is about breaking relationships.

And as a result, salvation is not about acting righteously and following rules of honour. Salvation is about restoring a relationship. Jesus came to bring us back into a relationship with God.

There comes a turn in this story of the younger son. There in the pig sty, in the lowest of the low places he could find himself, he comes to his senses. That’s repentance: a coming to your senses. What prompts this turn? Hunger? His abject need? Sometimes you have to hurt a lot before you come to your senses.

But in this story, it is the memory of his father’s character that turns this young man around.

How many of my father's servants...

He remembers his father. He remembers how he moved among the people in his household. His father is not a mean person. He is a good person. He is generous to his hired staff. They are well-fed and thrive in his household. He reasons that if he could be restored to his father’s household as a hired hand, he would do better than in this terrible place he was in now.

So he sets off from the far country and makes his way home. On his way he has a long time to practice his speech. Went to a Reformed seminary, because it had three parts:

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1. Confession: "Father I have sinned."

2. Affirmation of consequences: "I am no longer worthy of being your son." No more claims to anything in the father's estate.

3. Offer to make up for sin: "Make me like one of your hired servants."

Here we come to the heart of the story. Here we come to the reason why Jesus hangs out with sinners. It has to do with the character of his Father in heaven.

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"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The father sees his son in the distance, limping home in utter shame. The father had been yearning, aching, heartbroken. He has never stopped looking for his son, waiting, watching, hoping to see him again. He is the suffering father. He never gave up on the relationship.

And then comes the surprise:

The father feels compassion. Not anger, not rage. He feels "spalachna", a strong feeling in his guts. At the core of who he is he feels passionate love for his son.

Ran to his son – he girds up his loins and runs. Why did he run? In middle eastern culture, men never ran. They sauntered. But this father ran. He ran to protect him from hostile village who will heckle him, beat him at the city gates. Protect him from his older brother who would do the same.

He embraces his son. He should have been cool. He should have stayed in the house and let his son come crawling to him. He should have been in control of this situation, and let his son know who is boss here and how much the son is unworthy. Yet he embraces him. He is united with him. With his arm around his son, he protected his son. What the community intended to do to the son, they must now do to the father.

The father listens to the speech

says part 1 - God lets us confess

says part 2 - lets us see the damage of sin

but interrupts on part 3 - That's the gospel. He won't let us make up for our sin, work our way back into the family. Nothing the son can do but come home.

And there we see the son in the father's robe, the best robe of the house. Like the embrace, this robe says to the community, what you intend to do to him, you must do to me.

There he was, this shameful younger son, in that robe, clothed in all the authority and honour of his father. He is not a hired hand. He is not outside the family. He has status. He is family. He is a son. His relationship is restored.

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It calls to mind Isaiah 61:10

I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,

This robe of grace, of utter undeserved kindness is the robe of salvation. Salvation doesn't consist of being restored to a straight and narrow path, of being able to follow rules properly. It consists of being restored to a relationship and growing into that relationship and living out of that relationship. It consists of God running to us in Jesus, clothing us in his righteousness, won for us by his sacrifice, and being in his family where we delight in his good and generous nature.

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You and I are clad in this robe. God's amazing grace saved wretches like us.

How does it feel to wear that robe? To know yourself to be an absolute wretch, but to experience amazing grace instead of condemnation. Doesn't that robe feel great? Doesn't it feel good to belong, to be accepted, to have status? And what a feeling to know that it is all a gift, an undeserved, marvelous, life-transforming gift from a generous, kind God.

This is a story about God, the God whose heart the Pharisees did not know. Who would have expected him to embrace sinners? What scandalous love, this love of God.

Older brothers want us to measure up first. They want sinners to clean up their act, to earn their way back into relationship. But they don't know the heart of God. Outstretched arms of Jesus on the cross are outstretched arms of God. He will embrace us with scandalous love.

This is the gospel: in Jesus Christ, God graciously robes us in garments of salvation. And he places us in the church where this reckless love is learned and lived.

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