

Message: If Grace is True - Pt. 4
Luke 15: 1-7
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First Christian Church - St. Joseph, MO
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Many of us here come to this church from other faith traditions. I myself was raised Methodist by a Methodist pastor and sometimes pastor's wife. In Methodist churches, you talk about grace a lot. Grace was one of the central teachings of Jon Wesley, the founder of Methodism. So I remember at an early age my father explaining that God's grace can be extended to any person, even up to the moment of death. This probably explains why I became, at an very early age, an opponent of the death penalty. "Who are we," I began to wonder, "to put a time limit on how long we were going to give God to save someone? What if it was going to take a whole lifetime...and we cut that lifetime too short through the act of execution?" So I began at an early age this journey of trying to figure out "Just what are the limits of God's grace?"

What are the limits of God's grace? Does Gods' grace have an expiration date?

I want to offer here a confession or at the very least name my bias going into this conversation. As I have been reading the text that provides the basis for this series of messages (*If Grace is True*, by Gulley and Mullholland), I find myself thinking that the question for me isn't so much "How can we believe that God will eventually save all people?" but rather "How can we *not* believe this? How can we not trust this?"

Why do so many Christians argue so strongly and want to believe so passionately in a God who will NOT save all people -- a God who will condemn and punish? Why is that view of God so attractive to so many of us? Why are we so certain that there must be limits to God's love?

In their text [*If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*](#), the authors tell a story about Benny, a 70 year old mildly mentally challenged man, known in his neighborhood for his gentleness and generosity. One day two men break into Benny's house. They rob him and beat him so severely he ends up in the emergency room. The police quickly determine that the men who did this knew Benny personally -- and knew he'd just cashed his pension check. When his pastor arrives, Benny asks him to pray, and not to forget to pray for the men -- for the men who had viciously attacked him. What is that? That is grace.

How many of us could extend such grace? To pray for someone who had just hurt us so badly that we ended up in the hospital? Is there a point where we place a limit on grace? A point when we say "That person is lost. They are beyond the limits of God's grace." Maybe the question should be: Who is it that is really lost?

This is perhaps the question posed by the parable of Jesus in today's reading from Luke. Jesus is spending his time eating with tax collectors and sinners -- while the

Pharisees watch from a distance. Note from the start: It is the sinners who are coming to hear Jesus. It is the "good" religious folk who sit on the sidelines and judge.

The Pharisees are disgruntled because, in eating with them, Jesus is signaling that these outsiders, these outcasts, belong in the Kingdom of God. Whereas the Pharisees would clearly like to tell these sinners to "get lost" and to tell Jesus that he should have nothing to do with them. So in response Jesus tells a story about one who particularly goes in search of something lost. Of a shepherd who leaves his whole flock behind to find one lost sheep. Of a woman who spends all night looking for just one lost coin.

"Which of you," Jesus asks of the audience, and us, "would go to such lengths to find something that was lost?"

The answer, as Gulley and Mullholland point out, is: None of us, of course. It's ridiculous to leave behind the whole sheepfold to find just one stray sheep...and then throw a party when you do. And who spends all night looking for one lost coin...and then when you find it, throws a party that probably costs you as much as that coin and more? Nobody would do that. It's not practical. It's not logical.

Of course it's not. It's grace.

Have you ever had that experience? Of being lost...and then being found?

As I think over my life, it occurs to me: those persons who have shown me the most true love in my life have been those who have been persistent and patient with me, especially when I was lost. Those who have allowed me to grow, to change, to make mistakes, to get lost and take detours before I found my way to them. Those who have allowed me to fail and still persisted in loving me. If people can love this way, how much greater is the love we sometimes call God?

Jesus seems to be saying: It's the amazing grace of God that never stops seeking us, searching for us, drawing us closer and closer in. It is that grace that rejoices and celebrates when we find our way to God's love.

It seems to me that part of the irony of this text is that Jesus goes to those who others declare are lost and they are the ones who, by the end of the story, are found. They find God's love in his presence. Yet, it is the good religious folk, represented by the Pharisees, who remain lost -- lost in their condemnation, their judgment, and their own shortsightedness about the ability of God's grace to reach all people.

As I hear this text today, I am most focused on those in our culture who others have deemed "lost" -- those who others have declared are outside the limits of God's grace..

We think on the terrible domestic terror attack on the people of Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. We think of this one lone young man, who represents a way of thinking in this country that is intolerant of difference. This terrible act is a

reminder that there are those in our country who still believe that God's grace is limited by the color of your skin, your ethnicity, your racial background.

And we see grace...grace in those of us not willing to sit on the sidelines like the Pharisees but who have joined that congregation in mourning their loss. Grace in those who stand in solidarity against the sin of racism. Grace in those who are willing to open their eyes a little more to the reality and sin of systemic racism in our country.

We think on the historic decision on marriage equality from the Supreme Court this week. There are those among us who might say: Okay. It's a good thing. But what's the big deal? For those of us who have known what it is to live in a country where we were second-class citizens -- it is a big deal. For those of us who have been told that we were beyond the reach of God's grace because of who we love or who we are, it is a big deal.

We are reminded that even as many of us celebrated that historic decision on Thursday, there were a whole lot of good religious folks sitting on the sideline, praying for God's judgment and condemnation to rain down on this country.

And yet, we also saw grace, in the efforts of those of us not willing to sit on the sidelines like the Pharisees but who rallied to support these new freedoms. We saw grace in the witness of churches, like ours, who stood in solidarity with our LGBTQ friends and family -- and with all people.

And I think on those adults and children just returned from Royal Family Kids Camp, our yearly outreach to children who have experienced abuse and neglect--children who have been at times treated as if they were the "lost" --told by the adults in their lives that they don't have value. And we've seen grace in those volunteers at our camp not willing to sit on the sidelines like the Pharisees but taking the risk to reach out in love and grace to these hurting kids.

What are the limits of God's love? For the author's of our text *If Grace is True*, you might as well ask: What are the limits of the infinite universe? There are so many who are lost in this world, so many who have been told to 'get lost,' who have been abused and excluded and shut out. God's grace must be working overtime to reach out to them in love, trying to save them, trying to draw us in, inviting us all to be part of the Kingdom, encircling us all with love and compassion.

So to the question: What is the limit of God's grace?

I finally am left with a nagging thought. What if it is **us**? What if **we** are the limits of God's grace? What if the only thing that ever holds back God's grace from flowing freely and drawing all persons toward it is our willingness to be conduits of that grace?

I'm reminded of that saying: Without God we cannot. Without us God will not.

Amen.