

A Sermon for DaySpring  
 By Eric Howell  
*Prodigal Love and Blooming Grace*  
 Luke 15  
 March 30 , 2025

Our reading in 2 Corinthians is well-loved and one of the most powerful and beautiful in all of scripture. It speaks of the church and Christians having the ministry of reconciliation, and describes those who are in Christ, as new creation. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. This very well-loved line in 2 Corinthians can be translated in different ways:

If anyone is in Christ, *there is* a new creation or if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. The Greek provides only the spare scaffolding: If anyone is in Christ, new creation!

At any rate, what a promise. What a claim: that our participation in the life of Christ by our salvation in his grace makes us new and the magnitude of newness is described, however the grammar, as of the order of re-creation. And anyone, it's for anyone.

Has there ever been a better illustration of that good news than the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15?

The prodigal son parable has been lauded as:

- ...one of best known of all parables...
- ...the touchstone for literary consciousness from Chaucer through Shakespeare...
- ...the emblem of the literary power of Jesus' teaching...
- ...the metonymic story of sin and salvation...
- ...good news in microcosm...
- ...a magnificent example of the happy ending...

and the precis of the central thesis of the gospel.

If you want to see a story of a person born to new life, here it is. A story of a person in need—in desperate need-- of God's grace who then receives it, here it is. And yet, as in real life, the reality of transformation as experienced can be somewhat more complicated.

A father has two sons. The younger of the two tells his father he wants his inheritance now; the father gives it to him. The son then departs a temporarily wealthy young man. The description of what happens to him from then is an ongoing descent describing total degradation and dislocation.

He tells his father he wants his inheritance and thus breaks relationship with his family. He departs for a distant country and breaks relationship with his place. He squanders his wealth in reckless living and breaks relationship with his selfhood.

He who was a beloved son now is now broken in just about every way a person can be broken—now toiling in a foreign land for another man.

Feeding pigs—which culturally and religiously was the final, complete, and total break—pigs for Jews were unclean animals. Feeding pigs is the picture of the total break. And he's not just feeding pigs, he would happily eat what the pigs are eating. He'd be better off if he were a pig. He'd be better off, he thinks, if he were an unclean animal, in a foreign land, than what he's become. Once he broke relationship with family, land, place, self, the last breaking was with God. He's a shattered shell of a person. Have you ever been a shattered shell of a person?

Don't undervalue the courage it takes to come to yourself when you're not proud of yourself...when you loathe yourself...when you hate yourself and everything you've become. Any person who can look in the mirror and see themselves for who they are is a person to be respected, even if, as St. Paul says, the best we can do is see in a mirror dimly. He comes to himself—it's a power packed line in the story—the light of grace shines in that mirror; he comes to himself and says, "There's a better way. There's a better place. there's a better life, and I may just still have a chance at it."

He picks himself up, practices his speech and points his compass back home.

Back to home, back to the one place that might accept him—not as a son, but as a servant. Even that would be better.

So, he starts back home. A lost man fighting for his life every step of the way. Going back, backwards to the place he left behind, to see if there are any pieces of his former self that can be put back together. The central theme of the gospel has everything to do with this man's walk home and the reception that he will receive. If the parable is told in a way to emphasize the tragic descent and terrible consequence of sin, his return is all the more dramatic.

In one theatrical re-telling of this story, the young man sends a letter to his father ahead of him: "Father, I have repented. I want to come back home, but I'm not sure that you will be happy. If you want to welcome me, please put a white handkerchief in the window and then I'll know." And then he began his journey. And when he was near home, where the last curve in the road was, he was in front of the house. And what did he see? Not one handkerchief--it was full of white handkerchiefs, in the windows, everywhere flapping in the wind. The Father welcomes like this, totally, joyfully.

In Jesus' telling, the father, filled with compassion, runs to his son, puts his arms around him, kisses him. "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Yet, right then, there's comes another voice. Always another voice--the voice of the older brother. That voice says, "You're not worthy; you've wasted your opportunity. You've hurt people. You've done so much bad you can't be good because you can't unscramble eggs."

This voice of the older brother is often in us as well with words directed to ourselves as much as anyone else. These two voices, both in our heads. One says, "God loves you. Grace is sufficient. Maybe there's a chance." The other says, "You aren't worthy of love anymore. Give it up. You don't deserve anything more than what you've gotten because of all you've done."

The older brother is right to a point, can't we admit? The younger brother has been terrible. The voice of judgment has a place in our moral landscapes—the voice inside our heads that says, "What have you done? Look what damage you've wrecked in your own life and the lives of those who loved you." The older brother sees clearly the wreckage of lives and doesn't pretend the wreckage is not there.

We have these two voices in our heads. One says, "I believe I can be forgiven." The other says, "You aren't worthy." One says, "God is good." The other says, "But I am bad." One says, "There's still hope." The other says, "But not for you." Oh, the voices in our heads.

Grace cuts through it all. This is the central theme of the gospel. If anyone is in Christ—and here is emphasized *anyone*--We must all whisper this to ourselves: anyone. Anyone. Anyone. Anyone, no matter how degraded, no matter how unraveled, no matter how lost, anyone. Press the limits of this, and you find yourself at the cross where Jesus says to the thief, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." Hear him pray "Father, forgive them, they know not what they've done." Anyone. Kneel with Thomas, who disbelieved him and Peter, who rejected him, and the woman, who washed and dried his feet with her long hair. Anyone. Find Saul on the road to Damascus to hunt down Jesus followers and see him encounter God who interrupts him and changes his life. On the winding, rocky road home with the son, we are led with him to the heart of God who forgives compassionately and tenderly. It is moving to think of how the Father has loved us and always waited for us.

The gospel wants to plant a word deep in the soil of our hearts which says to us, "You can go home. There is grace there even for you. God loves you. You are beloved." Deep in the soil of our hearts.

I learned recently that bluebonnet seeds can lie dormant in the soil for decades--decades, waiting for the right conditions. They'll lie there waiting, waiting, waiting. They can be trampled over, plowed under, ignored. Until things are just right, and then, the bluebonnet awakens and says, "It's time." And then it sprouts, and it blooms for us to see. The word of grace planted in the soil of our hearts is like that: it waits and waits patiently for us. It can lie dormant until it's needed, and then, it awakens and it's ready and it blooms. Another thing I learned is that bluebonnets are evidence of neglected and degraded soil—that's where they grow. They flourish in just the places where the soil is not good soil. The

bluebonnet--our beloved state flower and sign of spring—is also a sign of redemption and a sign of hope in abandoned and neglected places. The sign of redemption in imperfect places. It is a sign of the grace, of new creation—and what’s more beautiful than a field of bluebonnets?

Grace plants the voice in our souls that says, “God loves you. You can go home.”

I think of the psalmist of Psalm 51, who knew well the judgment of the older brother’s voice. The psalmist who prays, “I know my transgression, my sin is ever before me. I have sinned and done what is evil in your sight. “ It’s the representative psalm of all of Lent. “Whatever judgment you give, O God, you are justified in your words and blameless. I am a sinner from my birth and all through my life.”

But the psalmist also knows the hope of younger brother’s voice, “Purge me, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. Let the bones you have broken rejoice.” Our prayer is for reconciliation of the voices within us to come into harmony with the voice of the Father who says, “Hush, child. It’s time to celebrate. You’re home.”

In the Father’s boundless, prodigal love, one brother prayer, “Create in me a clean heart,” is echoed by the other brother’s prayer, “Renew a right spirit within me.” One brother’s prayer, “Cast me not away from your presence,” is echoed by the other brother’s prayer, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.”

In each of us somewhere on the road to redemption, we learn to speak and then quiet the voices in our heads and hearts and listen for the voice of the Father. “You were dead, and now you are alive; you were lost, and now you are found.

In the tight, compassionate embrace of our Father, we learn that to say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. My name is not Younger Brother. My name is not Older Brother. Love is my name. (Thomas Merton)

Amen.

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