

Sermon: Traumatic Grace Text: Luke 15: 1-32 September 15, 2019  
 Rev. Steve Clifton, Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON

The Sabbath. The Holy Day. A day to celebrate the goodness of God. A day to enjoy freedom.

The people of God were slaves in Egypt. So when they were set free they made a covenant with God and one of the things they would do to set them apart in the world is honour the Sabbath. Slaves no longer, they would take a regular day off.

The gods of old worked constantly to make the universe run. The God of Israel was so strong and confident that the Holy One rested on the seventh day.

Slaves worked all the time at the pace that their masters set. The people of God were no longer slaves so they could rest. So the Sabbath day: kick back and relax. One day in seven was a holy day. A holiday. The Sabbath was a reminder of the greatness of God and of the freedom that God gives.

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Rest on the Sabbath...

But rest on the Sabbath became – don't work on the Sabbath. A subtle difference. The freedom from work became the duty not to work. And that duty became heavy. In my grandparents day the freedom of the Sabbath became a growing set of prohibitions. Don't listen to music. Don't play cards. Don't read anything for pleasure. Don't have too much fun. Don't relax too much. It's a holy day. Maintain proper decorum.

God gives a gift. We put it in a box. Make rules for its use.

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Ignatius of Loyola taught a form of prayer called the Examen. It's a prayerful review of your day. Its intent is to help you see the presence and movement of God in your life. In the people you meet, in the wonder of the world God created, in the highs and lows of your day, in all of this... the prayer helps to open us to encounters with the holy in the everyday of life.

But in time, over centuries, the emphasis shifted and this gift of a prayer became something less than a gift. The *examen* became an *examination*. It came to be called the "examination of conscience." It started as a prayer about knowing the gift of God's presence. It became over centuries a prayer about knowing your sinfulness. Instead of looking for God, you were to focus on your own unworthiness before God. It was about God's presence. It came to be about the reasons God might not want to be near you.

In the history of Christian spirituality we see this pattern is repeated. We receive a gift of grace and make into something less ... less joyful, less radical, and less accessible.

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It's like the parable we shared today.

A man had 2 sons. His younger son asks for his share of the family wealth. It's a terrible request. In the society of the time this request was the equivalent of the son telling his father that he should go die. In the Deuteronomist code (Deut 21:18-21) of the Jewish people, this disrespect shown by the son to his father was an offence not just against the father but against the whole community. The community was entitled to stone this son to death for making such a request.

But against all convention the father grants his son's wish.

The son goes off and blows his inheritance and he lives as an outcast, hungry and impoverished, breaking all the social and religious norms of decency in the process. And then he comes back to his father, hoping to be allowed to live as a servant in the family household. At least he would get three meals a day.

While the son is still far off his father sees his son and runs out to greet him. Men in that time did not run. It was undignified. Your legs would show. So the father endures humiliation for his returning son.

So then the son repents of his sin, recognizes the shame that he has placed on his father and the father forgives him, right? That's how we tell story. But that is not the parable found in the pages of Scripture. The son does not clearly repent. He does not fall on his knees and ask for forgiveness for the wrongs he has done to father and community and then is forgiven. That is not the order of things in the parable.

Rather the father runs to the son, embraces him and kisses him before he has a chance to say anything. The father's welcome is given before any forgiveness is asked for...

And the gospel doesn't clearly say that the son recognized how terribly he had behaved or how he had wronged his father. It says that "he came to himself" meaning he saw how bad his circumstance was and so he returns to make things better for himself.

When he asks for forgiveness does the son grasp how great his transgressions were? The text is vague. Maybe he experienced a deep, life-changing realization that remade him completely. Maybe. But maybe he is still a selfish scoundrel, manipulative still and just saw a return home as the best route out of poverty and hunger.

The son wants a warm bed and regular meals. His father calls for a robe and a ring and a fatted calf.

The son plans to ask to be a servant. The father restores the relationship. He welcomes the prodigal as a son.

The son violated communal and societal codes. His father restores his son's place in the community by having a party to honor his youngest.

The parable shared today isn't a story about someone doing wrong, asking forgiveness and receiving it. No, it's a story about ridiculous grace, about love so great that it risks humiliation

and break rules. It's a story about compassion that challenges social norms, about forgiveness being offered before it's asked for, about restoration being made even when it is uncalled for...

It's not about the "ho hum" of repenting and being forgiven. It's about what theologians call "prevenient grace" - grace that is extended before we even seek it.

But all that free grace and limitless love and unmerited forgiveness found in this story is a lot to handle. It has so many implications. It's not like the world we live in, where we think people should get what they deserve and that we earn what get in life. So we take the gift of this parable, and we put it a box, and we domesticate it, reduce to something manageable. We make the story like this: We may repent before God and the maybe if we are really contrite and say the right words in the correct way God forgives.

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Radical theologians talk about the Gospel of Jesus as a trauma. The miracle stories, the parables, the actions of Jesus are meant to traumatize the reader. The gospel comes into the world as we see it and turns everything upside down. It tears down the world we know and invites us to see a new world and to maybe live in a new way.

That's what the gospel for today does. It traumatizes us. A story is told and it shakes us up. What if God gives more than is deserved, even more than might be asked for? What if God gives others, who maybe we feel really do not merit it, love and acceptance and welcome. What if we are offered as gift that which we think we need to earn? What if God's love is untamed and boundless so much so that it seems crazy and unfair? What if God, like the father in the story, is willing to break the rules and ignore conventions to extend warmth and welcome? What if God forgives before we even think to ask? What would all this mean? How then would we live? What does this say about God?

So maybe let the story today be a trauma for a bit. Before we put it back in a box and domesticate these words of Jesus, might we sit with this story of unmerited grace and unjust love? Maybe let the story shake us up a bit, reflect on the implications for a time.

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One thing that came up for me this week as I sat with the trauma of this story...

On the night of May 8, 1373, a woman aged around 30 experienced 15 visions. The great English mystic, Julian of Norwich saw something of God and the greatness of God's love. She wrote her visions down and spent her life absorbing their implications.

In one vision, she saw God as a bright white expanse, like a limitless field of new fallen snow, and against this was a tiny, tiny dark spot, like a grain of pepper or a speck of sand. The great and limitless bright expanse was the love of God. The tiny speck was all the ills and evils of the world collected all together. Next to the love of God, the world's darkness is an insignificant speck. It is nothing when placed beside the greatness of the love of God. Julian's world knew darkness: plague; famine and war. And yet her vision of God illuminates the deepest darkness. God's love was so much bigger and brighter than all the darkness in us and our world.

The prodigal did terrible things, severed relations with family and community. Jesus said that while that son “was still far off his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him...” That is the gospel for today.

Amen