

Wherever Grace Is Needed

Luke 15:11-32

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As you may know, March is Mission Month at our church. The story of the Prodigal Son helps us to see where mission begins. Mission really begins with an experience of grace, some personal encounter with God's unconditional love. Because once you've experienced that kind of sacred affirmation, you want to pass it on!

To be known as a Global Mission Church or a church-in-mission begins with being a community of faith where Amazing Grace is not just a hymn that puts goose bumps on the flesh, but is a deep reality that establishes one's identity as one of God's own daughters, one of God's own sons.

The best example we have of grace is the Prodigal Son parable. Ah, yes, the younger brother! The proverbial younger brother! Off he goes with his share of the inheritance, off to seek his fortune. After spending it all foolishly in loose living, he finds himself starving for the corn cobs that the pigs are eating for their lunch. He comes to his senses and decides to return home to seek the mercy of his parents. But before he can utter a word of apology or confession or regret, he is scooped up into his daddy's arms and welcomed without judgment. Steaks are prepared on the grill. A ring is slipped onto his finger and a robe around his shoulders. None of this is deserved. It is all pure gift. It is what we call grace. It's the kind of love that is available without price, with no strings attached, with no expectation that anything is owed in return. When you've been on the receiving end of grace, you can't sing the hymn, Amazing Grace, without tears welling up behind your eyes..

This is where mission begins, with some undeniable experience of being loved.

If I were recruiting people to go to Spring Lake, New Jersey with the ADULTS ON THE LEVEL mission team, I would be searching for the phone number of the Prodigal Son. He's the guy I'd want on my work site. I wouldn't need to know if he or she could swing a hammer, cut a board with a circular saw, or measure lumber for a stud wall. Those are all skills one can learn on the mission site. I'd only want to know if this person had ever been loved when love hadn't been earned. For this is the person who is truly ready for mission work.

The older brother in the Prodigal Son story is in my rolodex; he's in my phone directory. I have him on speed dial. I am aware of his work ethic; I know about his loyalty; and I admire his determination to measure twice before cutting once. He is a master of the details. But the thing is: he has erected a shield around his heart that deflects the love that is offered to him. His daddy wants to love him, but he'll have no part of it. He refuses to be loved or to love. He sings the first line of Amazing Grace and then spits those words back out of his mouth. He'll have nothing to do, for now, with grace. Thus, he disqualifies himself from mission work. He may know how to build a house. But he has no clue about building the peace, no clue about building the blessed community. I ache for him.

In 1974, Andrea and I found our way into an extraordinary employment opportunity. I was in my last year of seminary. We had no income or housing, just a red Chevy Vega and a six month old son, Timothy. On the bulletin board at Andover Newton was a posting for a couple to serve as house parents in a home for troubled boys. The home was out in Leominster, Massachusetts. It was called Luke XV Home for Boys. The boys at Luke XV had all had a brush with the law.

They were adolescents headed for incarceration. They had all squandered their inheritance in dubious pursuits. No longer wanted at home, they had nowhere else to turn. Luke XV, on Pearl Street, was the last stop before juvenile detention. Our mission statement was to give wayward boys an experience of grace. I suppose you could call it an experiment in grace. As it turned out, we were the very first house parents to participate in this experiment. There were no guidelines; there was no manual. There was just the Bible story of a prodigal child and a loving parent. Luke Chapter 15 became our employment handbook.

Without going into the details, I'll just say that being a grace-bearer can be exhausting as well as exhilarating. The boys in that home were suspicious of love, suspicious of kindness, suspicious of being accepted just as they were. We gave them all the love we had. We have no way of knowing whether we succeeded or failed. What we hope is that in some small way we were able to impart a little grace, a little taste of that radical acceptance that holds the potential to make all the difference.

The world hungers for a little grace. A church in mission has an opportunity to be a grace-bearer. A church in mission has a chance to be a vessel for carrying a little of that unmerited affection into a world that has a ravenous appetite for that very commodity.

In the Black Hills of South Dakota, at Placerville Camp, the Silver Lake Conference Center of that region, at many a late night campfire, we'd stand in a circle, under the stars, holding hands and we'd sing aloud:

“It only takes a spark to get a fire going;
And soon all those around can warm up in its glowing;
That's how it is with God's love, once you've experienced it:
You spread God's love to everyone, you want to pass it on.”

We'd sing that song over and over until the fire had burned down to embers, and until the embers had just about exhausted themselves. "Once you've experienced it, you want to pass it on."

This sermon is what we might call a theological rationale for getting involved in the mission of the church. It begins with some encounter with grace. Please spend some time this week reflecting on those times when you've been either the receiver or the giver of grace. It's where mission begins. That's what I wanted to say to the church this morning on this second Sunday in March, our month for a mission emphasis. In the greatest of hope, Amen.