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September 7<sup>th</sup> 2025

Scripture: Luke 15: 11-32

Sermon Title: Our Gracious God

Luke 15:11-32

11 Then Jesus[a] said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.’ So he divided his assets between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled his stomach[b] with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to his senses he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my

father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” ’ 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’[c] 22 But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

25 “Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because

he has got him back safe and sound.’ 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

29 But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ 31 Then the father[d] said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ” (This is the word of God)

Prayer...

## **Introduction:**

Friends, in my mind the Fall season always begins in the beginning of September. Fall begins for me when school starts. We have changed our church calendar colors to green or what we sometimes call ordinary time. My hope is that we may carry the energy from our summer sermon series on Holy Spirit Healing stories into the Fall as we begin a new sermon series on grace and hope. In September all of our sermons will be on grace. In October, we will preach on hope. These are the first two words in our mission statement as a church and the Fall is always a time when I like to remind us of our common mission.

Story of our mission statement: (Developed in the summer of my first year as pastor, then evolved to current statement)

The word grace is especially meaningful because many people who visit our church and choose to stay have told me that the word grace draws them in. The word grace for me is important because it may

be my favorite word in the dictionary. As Christians we often think of grace as the unmerited favor we receive as a gift from God. That is a good definition, but I also like to think of grace as the power of God's unconditional love.

Grace is often associate with God's forgiveness when we sin, which is awesome, but grace is not only the love we receive through forgiveness. Grace is really the presence of God as unconditional love shown to us all the time. You see grace is the nature of God. The unconditional love of God is ever present all the time and a life of grace is a life resting in God's unconditional love.

The grace of God is with us when we fail and when we succeed. Our gracious God is with us when we feel vulnerable and when we feel strong. Grace is the power of God's unconditional love. We do not earn this love by our human efforts but it is always with us. The hope for our lives is that we might walk in this beautiful grace and share it

with others. It is also a healing journey when we learn to see God as gracious in nature rather than judgmental or dangerous. (Pause)

The story or parable of the prodigal son is one of the most well known of Jesus' parables. For me it is a story of grace. It is the story of a Father's unconditional love offered to two sons. The first son is a wild one who rebels from his parents and goes off to enjoy the world and all its pleasures. Unfortunately, his prefrontal cortex is not fully formed and clearly he gets over his head. He falls for the rather common struggles of lust and greed. Thankfully he comes to his senses and humbles himself. Like a member of an addiction recovery group, the young son hits rock bottom and is willing to do whatever it takes to make amends with his father. He returns home and is astonishingly greeted with a running dad. Now we need to pause here and highlight that in Jewish culture it was not common for a male authority figure to go running. But this father is full of joy. He thought his son was dead but his son is alive. His son was lost

but now his son is found. Some might suggest like the song we sang today, that this father is being reckless in his love, but this is the kind of love the father has for his son. If running to his son, seems reckless, so be it. The Father is not full of judgment. He is full of grace.

Now older son also receives grace from the father. The older son is mad because he is the religious one. He is the devoted son, who never left home. I personally relate to this son quite a bit. My parents will tell you that I was an intense child, but I did not really rebel much in high school or college. I mean I made a few mistakes, but I wound up in seminary or ministry, which for a strong Christian family is a pretty good place to go. I even was fortunate enough to get ordained as a minister while my grandma Stees was still alive and could see her grandson follow in the footsteps of her husband who was a pastor for fifty years. And frankly, like the older son in this story I have take a bit of pride in being a good obedient child that has

honored his parents and his faith. The good news for me and other folks that have taken the religious route is that the Father in this story loves us too. But the Father also offers the guidance that the game of comparison is harmful. Rather than becoming resentful the less rebellious son in this story is told by the Father to appreciate that his brother has returned. Jesus of course in this story is connecting the older brother to the religious leaders of his day who are judgmental of gentiles or obvious sinners who do not necessarily follow the laws. Jesus is communicating that our gracious God shows no favoritism to the religious, rather God is especially fond of the rebellious because they are the ones who are in need of a physician to heal them.

Now as I was exploring this story again, I found myself a little sad that the story of the prodigal son only includes two men and one father. The reason why three men are at the center of this story might be because of the patriarchal nature of the Greco Roman and

Jewish religious world that Jesus lives in. Of course, Jesus also referred to God as his Father or Abba in Heaven, so that also might explain why the story is about a father.

I do think for our modern ears it would be nice if the story were told in a way that would allow the father to also include a mother welcoming a struggling son or daughter home. There are prodigal sons and daughters. There are gracious mothers as well as fathers.

At our church, I want to remind us that it is perfectly appropriate for us to image God as both a mother and a father. It may even be preferable for some of us to image God as a loving mother, if that image helps us experience the more nurturing nature of God. And yes fathers also our nurturing of course. But there is something special about a mother's love and I think we as the church must evolve to see God as both a gracious mother and father in order for us to capture the deep grace that Jesus wants to convey in this story.

I encourage you to imagine the story of the prodigal son in a way that might open us all to receiving the grace of God whatever our gender or story.

As we reflect on grace as the power of God's unconditional love, I hope we might begin to realize that God is always gracious. As a pastor and spiritual director, I regularly encounter people of all ages who have an image of God that is not gracious. If people struggle to see God as gracious it is usually because of a couple reasons. One reason might be that they had challenging parents. Therapists and spiritual directors will tell you that most people that struggle to image God in loving ways have had either challenging parents or more aggressive pastors. A lot of spiritual abuse comes from pastors that teach hell fire and brimstone ideas about God. This is a bold statement but I think that it is impossible to reasonably hold in our minds an image of God who is both wrathful and loving.

Now we might try to hold those two images in our mind, but the problem with believing God is full of wrath is that we will picture God as someone who might rage at creation. Think of a time in your life where you witnessed someone lose their cool or when you might have seen someone start to rage out of control in some way. Our image of a God of wrath is kind of like that. Many of us have been taught that God loses it sometimes and like Zeus is ready to pounce on creation with fiery lightning bolts. The more sophisticated of us might say that this wrathful God only pounces on the truly evil people who commit injustice, but still we picture God as dangerous.

I do believe God is someone sovereign over creation and I believe that God is in a sense a judge over right and wrong. I believe there are consequences for our actions. Sometimes grace will still involve consequences for our choices. What I don't believe is that God is as fickle and unpredictable as human beings.

I image God as loving and gracious. I think God holds boundaries and defends the oppressed, but I don't believe God is a loose canon ready to wipeout people with a big blow if they do not follow his teaching.

Why is this important to image God as a loving parent, like mother or father who is always nurturing and never forsaking of children. Why?

Because if our image of God is limited to the worst that we see in humanity. If our image of God is full of rage rather than grace then we will have as a church promoted an image of God that will cause severe harm on innocent people.

The reason why most people leave church and go off to find another spirituality or who let go of religious belief entirely is primarily because Christianity, Judaism, and Islam keep promoting a God who is unpredictable and wrathful. Yes, we teach God is also loving, but we also image God as dangerous and ready to judge violently if needed. This is why the notion of hell is a big deal. Stay tuned

because I will explore our concept of hell at some point in this series on grace.

For today, I want us to dare to imagine that God really is like the father that Jesus describes in the prodigal son story. God is also really like a very nurturing and loving mother who cradles her children and protects them from harm. God will never rage at you even if you have experienced rage from other humans in your life. God is actually quite calm and collected. God can get angry but never is out of control. God is always love and is always gracious. And remember to be gracious does not mean to be permissive in everything. God gives us boundaries and consequences for our actions. Love does require boundaries and calls for good behaviour, but love is unconditional and always seeks the good of everyone. Love is always open to forgiveness and reconciliation. Never think of grace as overly permissive or weak. Grace is the power of unconditional love that can truly heal our world.

We will keep exploring grace together this month. My hope is that reminding us of our identity as a church of grace, will encourage us as we both experience God's grace and share it with our neighbors. Grace implies we do not need to be perfect. It is okay to not be okay. Grace also suggests that God is for us and not against us. God is only love and never violent. God is safe even as God might stretch us beyond our comfort zone. God is good and we actually are also good, even though we are imperfect and in need of grace. To be a church of grace in our town is to be a place that will only image God as unconditional love and never as wrath. If we do that, then we will frankly be healthier than most churches and we will be a haven for the good news of Gospel of Jesus Christ, who images God as the loving parent who runs out to welcome the prodigal sons and daughters' home. Let our church be a home for all. Let us help people come to know our Gracious God.

Please pray with me. (Pray for those who struggle to image God as love)