

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Celebrate Good Times

Philip Yancey, in his award-winning book, [What's So Amazing About Grace](#), tells the story of the younger lost son in modern context.

A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. *"I hate you!"* She screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the *Tigers* play. Because newspapers in Traverse City report in lurid details the gangs, the drugs, and the violence in downtown Detroit, she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Detroit.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, and arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car – she calls him "Boss" – teaches her a few things that men like. Since she's underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse, and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on a flier with the headline, *"Have you seen this child?"* But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child. Besides, most of her friends are runaways, and nobody squeals in Detroit.

After a year the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. And before she knows it she's out on the street without a penny to her name. She still turns a couple of tricks a night, but they don't pay much, and all the money goes to support her habit. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. "Sleeping" is the wrong

word – a teenage girl at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she's piled atop her coat. Something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

"God, why did I leave," she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. *"My dog back home eats better than I do now."* She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls – three straight connections to voicemail. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, *"Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."*

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father: *"Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?"* She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn't apologized to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with lights on since Bay City. Tiny snow flakes hit the pavement rubbed worn by thousands of tires, and the asphalt steams. She's forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard. A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. *"Oh God."*

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, *"Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here."* Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror and smooths her hair. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips, and wonders if her parents will notice. If they're there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepares her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and even her grandmother. And taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a banner that reads, *“Welcome Home!”*

Out of the crowd of cheers and well-wishers breaks her Dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorized speech, *“Dad, I’m sorry. I know....”*¹

He interrupts her. *“Hush child. We’ve got no time for that. No time for apologies. You’ll be late for the party. A banquet’s waiting for you at home.”*

I don’t know if you have ever had one of those, thank God your home moments, in either big or little ways, but they stick with us. As a parent or someone close to a child, most of us would feel a great amount of fear and grief, in amongst our anger, if a child left us for reasons that felt like a gut punch to all of our love. Their response to our love, one of rebellion. How we long to love our children and have them understand just how deeply they are loved by us. Yet how often do children respond with “I hate you” or “I’m out of here.” Even our adult children can break our hearts when they don’t respond to our inquiries about their well being, or don’t take time to show us that we as care givers, as parents, matter to them.

Whether or not you have children, there may be children in your lives that matter so much to you that, like a parent, your heart aches to know that they are well, or you do whatever you can to let them know that they are important to you. We do these things because relationships matter, love matters. Now imagine or remember times when it hurt so bad, maybe it still does, knowing that they either don’t care, or don’t take the time to care. Maybe you are completely estranged and you haven’t heard from someone for a long time and you just wish you could bridge the divide. You would be thrilled to celebrate good times with them again.

With this in mind you may be able to get a sense of God’s desire to be in relationship with you and with each of us. It gets to the heart of the parable that has been known for a long time as the parable of the prodigal son. Now, how something is named is also how we tend to view it. However, what if we renamed the parable to give it a different focus. What about the older brother? Who by the way was working out in the field as the party preparations are being made and the party begins, he was left in the field to work. Did you notice he didn’t even know there was a party going on until he was coming in from a long day of work.

A person would be pretty miffed, and that is saying it mildly, they would be pretty P.O.ed if they had come in from a long day of work to find everyone celebrating the brother who

¹ [The Prodigal Son: A Modern-Day Telling | Soul Food](#) Accessed March 28, 2025.

had dishonoured his father by asking for his inheritance before the father had even died. You might have noticed that the older brother couldn't even say "brother" he called the younger one "This son of yours". Maybe we could call this story, as I heard it named by another, the Lament of the Responsible Child.

You may be able to relate to the story through either or both of the brothers, or the father's points of view. Maybe you have actually lived this kind of story in some way. And we must look at the father's point of view...a parent who despite all of the harm, the dishonour, has an outpouring of love and joy that his son has returned. It does not mean that the older son is loved less or doesn't hold a special place, it just means that love triumphs over all the pain.

It doesn't make sense to the younger or older son. The younger one, whether coming back with a truly contrite heart or not, surely didn't expect a celebration. A chilly reception would have been more in order. And the older son can't get his mind wrapped around the welcome either. How could his father be so ridiculous as to let this so-called son make a fool of him again? There is no way, in this ancient culture of honour, that his father should have allowed this one to return in this way. What was he thinking!

But for the father, grace is the only way. It was a radical act in its time and it still would be a radical act of love today. If we were to try on another name for the parable maybe it could be, as again was said by someone else, "The Parable of Misunderstood Grace."

What is grace? Well, I have read it described as, "The free gift in which God gives all – eternal life, forgiveness, purpose, meaning – to human beings, who respond by trying to earn it."² That is what is so radical about this whole story is that God loves us beyond our imagining. God's desire is to be in relationship with us; to love us and be loved, and God lavishes this love on us even though we break God's heart consistently day by day. Each day that love is available to us.

Thing is, once we experience that kind of grace, recognize that we are loved, even with all that we get wrong, we have to look around and see, acknowledge that the same grace is there for everyone. Not just the people we think deserve it or have earned it. It is a free and lavish gift offered to the most hardened criminal, the pimp who deals in sex trafficking, as well as the child who squanders an inheritance.

What is even crazier is that the only way some of these people get to know that God loves them that much is if we demonstrate that love in our own words and actions. It is not that sin doesn't have consequences, but grace can still be experienced as we work out what needs to be worked out.

It is not straightforward or easy, it is complicated and messy, even so, grace is there, God's grace, God's love, God's inexplicable desire to be in relationship with this broken

² Jacobson, Rolf A., Editor. *Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Augsburg Books. Minneapolis. 2008.P78.

humanity, in relationship with each of us. This is what is so amazing about grace and grace is the central theme of this parable.

Let me end with a final quote from Phillip Yancey's book, *What So Amazing About Grace*.

We are accustomed to finding a catch in every promise, but Jesus' stories of extravagant grace include no catch, no loophole disqualifying us from God's love. [When we "come home"], to God it feels like the discovery of a lifetime. As Dutch author, Henri Nouwen, points out, *"God rejoices not because the problems of the world have been solved, not because all human pain and suffering have come to an end,...No, God rejoices because one of His children who was lost has been found."*³

May you experience God's grace today. May you be a conduit for God's grace in the world. May we celebrate these good times in community and as the church. In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.

³ [The Prodigal Son: A Modern-Day Telling | Soul Food](#) Accessed March 28, 2025.