

Lent 4C 3-14-2010
Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32
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The Sweet *-and Sour-* Sound of Grace

Grumbling... Religious people were grumbling... that's what prompted Jesus to tell not only this parable but also two others that came right before. The first was about a shepherd who leaves his herd of 99 sheep to go looking for one that is lost and the second is about a woman who loses a coin and turns her whole house upside down until she finds it. In both cases, there is [sweet joy](#) when the lost is found.

But I'll bet neither of these stories stopped the grumbling of the church people. You see, Jesus was associating with the wrong crowd. At the same time he claimed to be a teacher, prophet, or some other kind of holy man, he is also associating with the riff-raff of the community. That's just not right! He certainly shouldn't be eating with them. To eat with someone, to break bread and dip it into a common bowl, meant you accepted someone as your equal. [Eating with people gave them honor](#). It is a joyful and happy experience. In between bites there are stories, and laughing, and general enjoyment! Holy people, [church people, are not supposed to be so happy around those who commit sin](#). It sends the wrong message. It's really hard to make someone feel guilty for making bad choices when they are having such a good time. So instead of confronting Jesus, the church people simply grumble. "Who does this Jesus think he is, accepting these people and eating with them?"

The grace -the undeserved acceptance- Jesus shows to sinners is sweet and joyful to those outcasts and law-breakers he eats with but it has left a sour taste in the mouth of those grumbling church people - and probably a little

indigestion as well. [Is it possible that grace, like good Chinese food, has both a sweet and sour side?](#) Can grace To help us savor all that grace has to offer, Jesus serves up one of the most beloved and remarkable parables told in the gospels.

A man had two sons. Two sons, two flavors. The younger begins by giving his father the equivalent of a mud pie in the face. He asks for his inheritance while the father is still alive. Unbelievable! No one asks for such a thing. It would be like one of us saying, "Hey dad, I took out a life insurance policy on you yesterday and today I'd like to collect!" But right away, we know [this is no ordinary father](#) because he grants the request. He divides his property, likely 2/3s to the oldest and 1/3 to the youngest, according to the custom of the day. Now he is destitute and dependent solely upon his children and the butt of the town gossip. But I'm afraid the father's humiliation is only just beginning.

You see the son doesn't just start up his own business down the block to compete against his brother, he takes the money and goes off to some foreign country and BLOWS it. Think of it. [The family farm is auctioned off and the hard work and sacrifice of generations goes up in smoke](#) because one crazy kid went on a spending spree and one crazy father who gave him the freedom to do it. Now the town is really talking.

But there are consequences to selfishness and the young son experiences them like all of us do. You can't spend more than you make for very long and soon the destitute young man is trying to survive on his own any way he can. He looks for work but there is almost none to be had. The best he can do is feeding pigs. PIGS! How low must a Jewish man sink in order feed pigs? It was against the law to even come in contact with such unclean animals, let

alone eat out of the same trough. No one seemed willing to help this poor guy out either. I'm guessing even then people were saying, "You made you bed, now you've got to sleep in it".

However, this young man finally wises up. The Arabic translation of the bible says he "got smart". [He decides to return home](#). He knew he would never be welcomed back as a son to his father but perhaps he could gravel his way into some kind of job. He would likely never taste the joy of love again but at least he would have three squares a day.

The one thing the son forgot was that **this was no ordinary father**. Far from disowning him, this father has been watching for him. Everyday he scans the horizon, straining for any sign of his son's return. Then one day... it happens... and even from a distance the father recognizes his beloved coming home and he runs to greet him. [He RUNS!](#) Old men, especially in the Middle East, just don't do that. It's undignified and demeaning but this father could care less. The only thing he cares about is that his son has returned.

I don't even think he heard the carefully crafted speech the kid had all worked out because the father interrupted him before he could finish. There would be no talk of second hand status. "You are my child. I thought you were dead, but now you're alive! You were lost but now you're found! I don't care what you've done. I don't care where you've been. You are here now and there is only one thing to do.. PARTY! Celebrate! Give thanks! Fire up the grill!

Now if the story ended there, we would have more than enough to consider. Grace is truly amazing and sweet! Undeserved acceptance and love that

knows no bounds and no conditions has the power to make all things new. It has the power to give life to people who are dead or lost or without hope. **We can always return to God's loving embrace** no matter how low we sink. Grace is God's creative power to restore us and make us into new people.

But the story goes on. The elder son, the one who has not (yet) humiliated his father or wasted the family's fortunes, is understandably sour on this whole sordid affair. This is not right. This is not fair! The father tries to help him understand that he has a brother once again but it is clear that this "son of yours" is not *his* brother. [The oldest is caught up in a world of *quid pro quo*.](#) Everyone should get what they deserve. **But the scandal of grace is that no one gets what they deserve.** Grace is incredibly sweet when you are hungry for a new start but it can also be gut-wrenchingly sour if you are overstuffed with self-righteousness.

God places the highest value on reconciling relationships, on making amends with one another. Jesus makes the point that **grace always comes before repentance.** [Grace is in fact the very thing that makes repentance possible](#) and it is the power that can truly change us from the inside out. God's arms are open to all. There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus. That is the sweet sound of amazing grace. The only sour note is the temptation to grumble about that grace going to someone we find questionable or undeserving. But all kinds of wretches throughout history have been accepted by God and then transformed by God's willingness to sacrifice everything, and even suffer humiliation, so that kids can always come home. That is something to celebrate! That is something to sing about with joy! - (The Hymn of the Day is "Amazing Grace")