

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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The Scandal of Grace

(presented at Gaetz Memorial United Church, Red Deer)

The elder brother became angry: "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. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" – Luke 15:11-32

I don't know about you, but one of the most common conversations we had in our house when our kids were growing up was over what was fair. First it was about bedtime. Sara, our oldest, seemed to think that she should be entitled to stay up as long as we did. When we insisted she go to bed at an appropriate time for a toddler, she would stamp her feet and protest, "It's not fair!" Later, when Sean was a child, he thought he should stay up as late as she did, and he would complain, "it's not fair."

Later still, when they shared a bathroom, Sara thought it was really unfair how much time Sean spent in the shower. And Sean thought it was unfair how much of the available shelf space was occupied by hair products and cosmetics.

And then there was the remote control. Who got to watch which channel for how long became a frequent topic of dispute, not just with the kids either.

If I had a loonie for every time I have heard the complaint, "It's not fair!" I would be considerably wealthier than I am today! And I suspect the same is true for most families. From a young age, children are very sensitive to situations in which they think they are not being treated fairly. It might be the number and value of Christmas presents, who does what chores how often, the rules around when and how often they can use the car, or (for adult children) how they are treated in the will, which leads us into the story of the Prodigal Son.

The story that we heard from Luke's gospel this morning is a story about the family inheritance. The younger son treats his father very unfairly by demanding

his inheritance early, while his father is still alive. The father treats the returning prodigal more than fairly by welcoming him home with open arms, and when he does so, the older brother has a tantrum, stomps his feet and says, in effect, “It’s not fair!” He goes on to make a pretty good case: “I’ve been a good son, worked hard, done everything you’ve asked, but you’ve never thrown me a party. But when this son of yours comes home, after the way he treated you, you throw him the mother of all parties. You are spending my inheritance on him! It’s not fair!” To which the father replies, “Nothing diminishes your place in this family, but your brother is still your brother and my son is still my son. We thought he was dead, and when we found out he is alive, we had to celebrate.”

This is a story about fairness. But it is not an example of how to be a good parent. The older son has a legitimate complaint. The younger son gets treated indulgently and the older son gets taken for granted. It really isn’t fair that the older one never had a small party, while the father throws the delinquent son an extravagant one. This parable is not an example of how to be fair.

But parables are not moral lessons. They are provocative puzzles. They often have a confusing or bewildering component that make people think further. This parable is intended to get us thinking and talking about what is fair and what is not. And maybe there are no easy answers to the question of fairness. Maybe the only way to be fair is to keep wrestling with the question of what is fair.

For all of our sensitivity to being treated unfairly, most of us are way more sensitive to the ways in which we are deprived of benefits, than to the equally unfair ways in which we get more than our share of benefits. Most men, for example, are far less sensitive to the ways in which we are the beneficiaries of male privilege, than to the possibility we might pay more than our fair share of taxes. Those of us who are white, heterosexual, well-off, North Americans tend to take for granted how the unfairness of life benefits us.

- It takes a special effort for a white person to try to see how racial inequalities affect first nations people and people with darker skin.
- It takes a special effort for a heterosexual person to understand the perspective of gay, lesbian or transgendered people.

- It takes a special effort for a well-off person to understand what life is like for a low-income person.
- It takes a special effort for a North American to understand what life is like for a person from Africa or Latin America.

The parable of the prodigal son is designed, I think, to get us thinking about how fairness can look different from different perspectives. And it can. The two brothers had very different perspectives on what was fair their family. These disputes are common in families, and they are common in society.

These disputes are common, and once you have done your best to sort them out, and still there is lingering bitterness, there is only one way to move past them, and that is through grace, through generosity and forgiveness. Conflicts over what is fair and what is not fair can tear families and communities apart. What holds them together is a willingness to err on the side of generosity, to err on the side of grace. God's generosity, like that of the father in the story is prodigal and prodigious. Sometimes it scandalizes us. But even more often, it saves us. Because even if we often feel like the unfairly treated older brother, there are times when we are as vulnerable and desperate as the younger son and we need to be embraced by a scandalous love and welcomed home.

Let me tell you a story, this time a story of my own creation, inspired by this parable:

George sits in his old recliner, staring out the window at the dark street. George spends a lot of time sitting in that chair these days, brooding over the past, mentally revisiting the bitter arguments that led his younger son Bill to leave home. Most of the time these days, he is sorry for his own part in the conflict, for the harsh words that he never really meant, the anger that got out of control. Sometimes, though, the old anger swells up in him like it had all happened yesterday as he revisits the ways in which Bill was cruel to him.

After a particularly violent shouting match, Bill had left home and never come back. After three years with no contact, he called home once, at Christmas. Now

he calls twice a year, at Christmas and on George's birthday, and they exchange polite, but strained greetings, in which little is said, but much simmers below the surface. Father's Day goes unacknowledged. Now, Bill is married to a woman George has never met, has children George has never seen. And although they seldom speak, and never meet, Bill is constantly on his mind, the pain of their estrangement never far from consciousness.

He and his elder son George, Jr. work together at the shop every day, but their relationship is business-like. They never talk about Bill, about Mary's death, about their common, complicated grief. They are men, and men find it difficult to talk about the deep things, the hard things; at least that is the way it has been for the men in George's family. So they do their work, laugh over the latest joke, complain about the latest bone-headed decision out of Edmonton or Ottawa, and then they go home, each to their own silent thoughts, their own empty lives. They aren't happy with the way things are, but they are comfortable with it, resigned to it.

Now, however, after the tests and visits with doctors, George has a decision to make. Before, the future stretched out without limit. He could be patient, waiting for the wounds to heal on their own and for Bill to make the first move, to come back to him like in the old story. Now, the doctor's news has made him realize he can no longer be patient: with the limited time he has left, he has to make the first move. But how to do it? What to say? What could be said? He tries talking to George Jr. about it but Junior just shrugs.

So he sits in the recliner, staring out at the dark street, considering. There are no easy solutions; only what now seem like inexcusable delays. So, he struggles out of the recliner, goes to the desk, takes out a sheet of paper. "Dear Bill," he writes. "I am sorry I didn't write this letter years ago. I have been stubborn. Perhaps we both have. But things have changed, and before I die, I want to clear things up between us. I want to meet your wife. I want to hold my grandchildren. But most of all I want to say I am sorry..."

The letter goes on from there. Three pages worth. More words than George has written in years, but not one which can be left unsaid. When he feels finished, he reads it over, puts the pages in an envelope, addresses and stamps it, and even though it is late at night, walks it to the mailbox and drops it in, before he can change his mind.

And then, feeling more vulnerable, more exposed than he has ever felt, he waits. Three days pass; the letter must have been delivered, but there is no response. Every time the phone rings, his heart races. Might it be Bill?

Four days pass, then five, then six. Each day he watches for the mail carrier, and checks his mailbox, and each day he is disappointed. With each passing day, his hope rises and then sinks, sinking a little deeper each day. He invested more hope in that letter than he had realized. But perhaps some gulfs are too wide to cross. Perhaps he was foolish to even try.

And then, Sunday morning, he is just out of bed, eating his breakfast, when the doorbell rings. From where he is sitting, he can't see the front door, but out the window, a strange car is stopped in front of the house with a woman sitting in the passenger seat and what look like car seats in the back. As he gets up, hope and dread rise in his throat together. With the opening of the door, he and Bill might, with not a little grace, find a new way; it will take all the courage he has to be honest and open and vulnerable. But, however noble their intentions, he and Bill could so easily fall back into the same old destructive patterns. Dread and hope mingle together. With his heart in his throat, George takes the doorknob in his hand, and turns it, and it is as if a universe awaits on the other side.