

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Come in to the feast! This is your home. This is your family. How can we not celebrate?”

That is the invitation and the open question that this parable of Jesus seeks to get across. It is the invitation and the question for both brothers in this story that Jesus meant to be heard also as invitation and question for those he addressed, particularly the Pharisees – the good, faithful, morally upright church people of the day. And so, as I always like to emphasize when Pharisees make an appearance, it is also the invitation and the question for the likes of me and you two millennia later and half a world away. Because “Pharisees R Us.” And Jesus cares enough about Pharisees, then and now, to tell this story, this parable, in order to draw us into the Father’s embrace.

As many times as I have heard and studied today’s Gospel text, I continue to be struck by how amazingly well-crafted it is. It is very clever. Maybe too clever even, because we have tended to miss its point. Our first communion hymn this morning is that old favorite, *Amazing Grace*. You probably know the story of its writing. The author, John Newton, was a sailor involved in the slave trade, who had a conversion experience during a storm at sea and later became a Anglican priest and abolitionist. The “amazing grace” he experienced was God’s forgiveness for his participation in the slave trade, which he linked to our Gospel text with the line, “I once was lost, but now am found.” Clearly Newton identified with the younger brother in the story, the so-called “prodigal son,” and that’s very understandable and appropriate, given his life story. But in changing the grammar of the biblical text from the third to the first person, his hymn can subtly pull us away from intended meaning of this parable, because it is precisely the shifting grammar of this story that holds its meaning, especially at the end.

A quick aside here that also has to do with the grammar of this hymn: As many of you know, I went to a Lutheran high school in St. Louis, and we began every day with chapel. Every chapel service had at least one hymn, and *Amazing Grace* was definitely in the starting rotation. Being a teenager and a bit of a smart-aleck, with smart-aleck friends, one of the things we started to do whenever this hymn rolled around was instead of singing, “who saved a wretch like me,” we’d point at each other and sing, “who saved a wretch like *him*.” We thought we were pretty funny, and clever. Little did we know that we were actually pulling us back in the direction of the intended meaning of the biblical text.

I want to quickly take us back through the parable with a focus on the shifting narrative between the father and his two sons and with particular attention to the shifting grammar at the end. The first part of the story is the set up. It’s exaggerated and unrealistic. The younger son asks for his inheritance before his father dies, which isn’t a thing, but it’s necessary for the story because the father can’t be dead for it to work. He also goes off to a foreign land, which is also unlikely since this was not a money economy. A significant part of his inheritance would be a share of the flocks, and probably slaves as well. But again, it’s necessary for the story in order to separated him from his family and their influence.

Let’s take a moment to consider the attitude of the younger son toward his father. How does he regard him? Not really as family, not as his father, but as a source of wealth, a means of serving himself and his own desires. After he has squandered his inheritance and finds himself in desperate circumstances, he begins to think of home and his father’s slaves. By claiming his inheritance he knows that he has effectively cut himself off from any claims as a family member. But he remembers how well his father’s slaves were treated, and thinks that maybe that will be his salvation – to be a slave in his father’s household. And so he returns to his father with the intention of becoming his slave.

How differently his father thinks of him, though! By all rights, he should consider his ungrateful child as good as dead to him. But he doesn't. And maybe, from the fact that he sees the younger son when he is still far off, he has been constantly waiting and hoping for his return, scanning the horizon every chance he gets. And when the son reveals his plans to return as a slave, his father orders him to be dressed as a son, saying "this *son of mine* was dead, but now is alive. He was lost but now is found!" Against all hope and with no claim to his father's love, he is embraced and celebrated.

Okay, so far, so good. This part of the story we get and we get and appreciate. This is God's unmerited grace in action, amazing grace that John Newton saw at work in his own life and that maybe we can apply to our own. We know that we have been sinful, and we know that God has been gracious to us. We emphasize that here every Sunday. It's the next part of the story that we forget, or tend to gloss over. So let's have a look at that too, now with close attention to the grammar.

The older brother comes to the house from a long day at work on the land. He notices the party and wonders what's going on. So he asks a slave. And the slave, surely taking his cue from the father's reception of the returned son that he witnessed earlier, says to the older brother, "your brother has come..." This enrages the older son, and he vents to his father, revealing his true colors, his own understanding of his relationship both to his father and his brother. Notice the resentment toward both, but notice also what he reveals about his own understanding of his relationship with his father: "All these years I have been working like a slave for you..." A slave! The older brother thinks of himself as his father's slave! You get the irony, right? What the younger brother thought about his future relationship with his father the older brother has been actually living out all of these years! And never did he get a reward, a goat to go off and celebrate with his friends. What the younger brother did the older brother wants, if maybe on a more restrained scale. He too wants to go off, away from his father, and party. And then, when he speaks of his brother, he speaks of him as "this son of yours" to his father, not "my brother," and the father quickly corrects him: this *brother of yours*, he emphasizes, was dead but now is alive, was lost but now is found.

That shift in grammar and focus is the key to this story. The Pharisees at the beginning think about the sinners and tax collectors that Jesus welcomes and eats with as "those people" that Jesus ought to consider as good as dead because of their shameful behavior and life choices. They are the older brother in this story that Jesus tells. He is pointing out that "those people" are "your sisters and brothers." How can we not care? How can we not celebrate?

Jesus also wants the same for us, for us to see our fellow human beings, whoever they might be, not as those we can compare ourselves to feel superior to, but as God's beloved children and our beloved siblings. He also wants us to see God as our beloved parent, not as our boss and task master.

We smart-alecky high school kids weren't far off in our rewording of Amazing Grace. God's grace is not only or mainly for "me." It is for "them," those we tend to look down on and dismiss. We don't know how the older brother received his father's pleading, whether he came around to be reconciled with his brother, or whether he stormed off and sulked, ironically cutting himself off from his family the way his younger brother had earlier. We don't know, and that's the point. Because the invitation and the question are really for us. "Come in to the feast! This is your home. This is your family. How can we not celebrate?" I really wanted to stop there, do the proverbial "mic drop." But I don't think Kevin wants me dropping mics, so I'll say this. My prayer for us, for you and for me, is that we see God's Amazing Grace not just for us personally, but for the world that God so loves in Jesus Christ, especially for that part of the world we don't happen to care for. May that grace move our hearts to trust God and love our neighbor. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.