

## *Prodigal Sibling Syndrome*

Today is Welcome Sunday. Whether you are returning to worship as a long-time member or joining us as a newcomer, we welcome you back to what my predecessor, Pastor Wayne Bacus, described as “a place of grace.”

Grace, or God’s unmerited, absolutely unconditional love, resides at the heart of who we are and what we do. We open our doors to all people as a sign of such grace. We welcome all to the Lord’s table as a sign of grace. We preach grace. We sing hymns about grace. And, inspired by the Spirit, we serve and care for others in response to grace.

Yet grace is sometimes hard to accept. We feel that we do not deserve it, for example, when it becomes apparent to us through confession that **we have not made God the center of our lives nor have we loved our neighbor as ourselves.**

But what about other people? Does God accept the pariah of our culture – the “lazy poor,” the criminals, the immigrants – the way we trust God accepts us? And what about material comforts or welfare? Should they receive what they did not earn or do not deserve?

When Christians say no to either of these questions, it’s possible they suffer from an illness that has periodically overcome me.

I call it “Prodigal Sibling Syndrome.”

## The Story

The word prodigal comes from one of Jesus' parables. It refers to someone who mismanages their finances, a person who spends their money freely, recklessly, and wastefully. The sibling of the prodigal refers to the older brother in the parable.

You know the story: a father has two sons. The younger son decides he wants his share of the property his father has promised him. The father grants his son the wish, and the son departs to a faraway land, only to "[squander] his property in dissolute living" (Luke 15:13). Now living with nothing, the son decides it would be better to return to his father and seek forgiveness. He devises a carefully worded confession, one we can imagine him rehearsing to impress his father and show him how truly sorrowful he is.

The confession, we discover upon the son's return, means nothing. The father sees his son, and before his son can even say a word the father **has already forgiven him**. Talk about grace! The father embraces his son, welcomes him home, and promises a lavish celebration in honor of his son's return.

But there's a problem.

When the older son, who was out working in the field, discovers what his father has done, he becomes angry and refuses to join the celebration. And we all know why: **it isn't fair!** His younger sibling got to have all the fun while he stayed and worked the land. When he comes home, his father acts as if nothing happened. Not only that, but he throws a part for the younger son and treats him like royalty!

The older son, we discover, has **Prodigal Sibling Syndrome**. He cannot bear the thought of his younger brother getting something **he does not deserve**.

We don't know what happens to the older brother and whether he changes his mind. We do know, however, how the father responds. It's incredible. "Son," he says reassuringly to the older brother, "you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 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" (Luke 15:31-32).

Jesus never explains this parable; he has no need. The parable speaks for itself. The father in the story represents God, and the coming kingdom, one that is already appearing among us (see Luke 17:21), **will turn everything we believe about who-deserves-what upside down!**

### **God's Upside Down Kingdom**

In today's Gospel Jesus teaches something similar. The disciples find themselves bickering over who among them is the greatest of Jesus' followers (Mark 9:34). Upon arriving at their destination, Jesus patiently sits them down, the way a parent would carefully explain something to children. He says to them, "Whoever wants to be the first must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35).

Jesus, we discover, is not simply talking about the kingdom as something his disciples should **expect** in the future. It's something they should **enact** in the present! Lead others by serving them.

Martin Luther King offers a helpful way of explaining Jesus' teaching. Many of us, he says, want to be ahead of others the way a drum major is ahead of the band. We want recognition. We want to be first. In today's parlance, we want to be influencers.

And here is the good news: from a Christian angle, there is nothing wrong with the desire to be seen, to be ahead of the pack, or to be recognized. You can still strive to be first, King remarks, but **strive to be first in serving others**. Use whatever status you have at work or in the community, whatever gifts or abilities the Spirit has given you, to lift others up, especially the least fortunate, helping those who cannot help themselves.

Let's not just **expect** the kingdom, in other words. Let's use our time together in worship and fellowship to practice **enacting** it! Let's turn this world and its values upside down by welcome strangers, by carrying the burdens of those we may hardly even know, by treating the poor as if they were rich, by honoring every single person within this room irrespective of race, gender, political affiliation, or sexual orientation.

Let's serve others here as Christ has served us, and let's do it all without any expectation in return!

It sounds crazy, I know, but the more we practice it here in church, the more we inoculate ourselves out there against Prodigal Sibling Syndrome.

May God give us the inspiration to enact His kingdom, and may the Kingdom for which we pray come.

Amen.