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## *Looking for Love in all the Wrong Places*

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*Luke 7:36-50*

*Just a brief word, if I may, as your executive presbyter, before the reflection on the Scripture we read today.*

*Friday night, my wife Jen and I were traveling home from Chicago – I'm driving, and she's on her phone, our usual pattern – when Jen says, you have to hear this. She proceeds to read me a story just posted on the Star-Tribune website, about the partnership between Westminster and St. David's Child and Family Development Center.*

*Why did I need you to hear this so urgently, you ask? Because Jen is a speech and language pathologist for the Minnetonka Public Schools, working with young children there in ways very similar to what St. David's is doing in this very building. Because our partnership at home joins lives committed to church, faith, and the well-being of children – just like the Westminster, St. David's partnership – and because we knew we'd be here this morning, we both needed to wipe a tear from our eyes as Jen finished reading.*

*Thank you, Westminster, for the creative and generous use of your resources. We're both so very grateful for your witness and ministry*

This executive presbyter identification and role I now carry is but part of my story.

It hasn't always been that, nor has it always been here in Minnesota. Back in the day, I was making a daily commute from New Jersey into New York City on the train.

Commuter trains are not your grandmother's Pullman cars. Most days, it is packed and hot; odds are about even someone will spill coffee on you, and if you forgot your ear buds ... oh, my. This one particular day, I was next to the window, with two women sitting between me and the aisle. One of them – the one further away – had a book on her lap. I couldn't tell what the book was, but I could sure hear the conversation about it.

What are you reading, said the woman in the middle to the other.

A book a friend gave me. She said it changed her life.

Really? What's it about?

It's some sort of guide to life. The chapters have titles like Love, Hope, Grace...

What's grace, the second woman said.

I don't know. I haven't gotten to grace yet...."

*I don't know...I haven't gotten to grace yet.*

Strikes me as a bit ironic as I think about it now, given how grace – and words based on its basic root – have so become a part of our daily lexicon. We say grace before meals. We are grateful for someone's kindness, congratulated when successful, and try to be gracious in hosting friends. Good service results in a gratuity. And a bad actor experiences, we say, a fall from grace.

The Bible talks about grace too, but unlike the way we seem to use it. The Bible's grace is just a little bit more complicated. Because in the Bible, grace is seldom about us, and not about rewards. But that's putting the analysis ahead of the story.

Some background to what we read this morning might help. When Jesus began his public ministry, there already was a religious revival underway in Palestine: not around Jesus, but around this group of people we know as the Pharisees. The Pharisees promoted a faith and piety built primarily on what people did. There were all sorts of specific rules. You never entered the home of a gentile, never dined with so-called sinners, never worked on the Sabbath. You were required to wash your hands seven times before dinner. (Try that with your eight-year-old sometime!)

Those who were blessed by God were blessed because they had lived right; because they had impressed God. Those who struggled did so because they hadn't lived right.

The leader of the Pharisees was a man named Simon. He has developed a bit of a reputation from 20 centuries of people looking back on his story. One Scripture commentator described Simon as a "self-righteous person with blown up moral and spiritual feelings of superiority." I'm guessing Simon is the sour-faced person on the front of the bulletin, pointing.

But it would also be true that Simon the Pharisee was successful, learned, intellectually inquisitive, not prone to easy answers or superstition; ordered, with a nod to tradition and societal stability. In short, the kind of person who holds communities and institutions together when chaos is erupting all around them. A pillar of the community. That's probably a pretty good description of many of you, as I think of it.

The Pharisees were a religious force in first-century Palestine. But something else was happening, too. Stories swirled through towns and villages about this Jesus who had praised a Roman centurion as having more faith than anyone in Israel. Who had healed a half-breed Samaritan with leprosy; and another unclean woman with bleeding. He even had a lengthy conversation with a Samaritan woman. This Jesus was breaking all the rules. And yet his following was growing.

That's the climate in which Simon the Pharisee had invited Jesus to his home. Don't know why, exactly. But it was probably awkward from the get-go, and it gets even more so when one clearly uninvited participant enters the story. We don't even know the name of the woman but for her identification: "a sinner."

If Simon was part of the upper class, this woman would most certainly be the lower. If Simon was part of the religious class, she would most certainly not be. Some have speculated she was a prostitute.

Whatever the truth of her identify, her sudden presence at this gathering was, at least for the host, unwelcome and uncomfortable. Simon is furious, especially at Jesus, who seems to be condoning such a thing. (Although, interestingly, Luke tells us only what Simon was *thinking!*) To which Jesus responds with a story, about two debtors, a forgiving creditor, and gratitude; a story of what we now call grace that concluded with a scolding of the arrogant Simon and granting dignity to this woman from the street.

*What's grace, the second woman said.*

This is grace, said Jesus, that all of us, debtors of different shapes and sizes, all of us are forgiven all, freely, without request and without condition.

Which is exactly why grace is so wonderful, and exactly why grace is a problem. Because Jesus' understanding of grace was certainly not Simon's, and given the way we use the word these days, it may not be ours either. Shouldn't people get what they deserve, more or less; shouldn't those who play by the rules end up with life's blessings?

*What's grace, the second woman said.*

*I don't know, replied the first. I haven't gotten there yet.*

We often look at Bible stories for they mean, for good actors and bad; for the moral lessons they teach us. For the rules we think society, and Christians, and especially other people, should be living by. This one, too. I once asked a class of sixth and seventh graders who we should emulate in this story, and to a person, they said, The woman, because she is loving. And so, I said, your mother wants all of you to grow up to be someone who reportedly lives on the street rather than a leader of society, right? They were silent.

And so I wonder if we might approach this story a little differently. What if, instead of looking for moral lessons, or rules, that especially others should follow, what if you looked at this story instead as a mirror. That you ask of yourself the questions we usually ask of these main characters.

Instead of asking Simon about being this arrogant rule-imposer, ask yourself:

Is there a time in my life when I chose to use my power or position or knowledge or experience to dismiss or ignore others, and I was unwilling to be challenged otherwise?

Have I ever declined to risk my status and prestige, my time, my treasure, to follow what this Jesus might be asking of me – especially if doing so might ask me to act contrary to virtually everything I have learned and believed?

Have I ever nursed a sense of grievance and resentment because I felt I deserved better than I'd received?

This is not a guilt trip I'm inviting you to take. Those places where you perhaps found Simon in yourself are not the places of failure, but humanity. And the very place you'll find Jesus, and Jesus' offer of grace and forgiveness, of welcome and care.

Or look at the unnamed woman, a sinner, and ask of yourself what we have too often speculated about her:

Have I ever had occasion to compromise myself – a time I held back saying the right thing when it could have made a difference, because I was afraid of how it might look.

Or when I signed off on a project or direction I didn't believe in, just because it wasn't worth a fight.

Or when I really did sell myself to the highest bidder,  
because I liked – or needed – the money, the recognition,  
the adulation.

*What's grace, the second woman said.*

*I don't know, replied the first. I haven't gotten there yet.*

Sometimes, in our desire to make everything – including ourselves – look so good, I wonder if grace eludes us too. A church leader named Gordon McDonald once observed, The world can do almost anything as well or better than the church. You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, heal the sick, work for justice on the southern border, insist black lives matter. There is only one thing, really, the church can do better than the world. The church can offer grace.

In an age where we have a front-page seats to a litany of human turbulence, from climate to education, racism to opioids, that is crushing people and families in our small towns and on our borders alike; in a society that separates us from one another with the bright lights of hierarchy and accomplishment, money and power, as winners and losers, and then talks at each other with the kind of toxicity that makes the already vulnerable simply a means to someone else's end:

In this place, in our places, grace invites a new way: To stand, and speak, and live, where those who see and hear us will not only sense the presence of God, but will also see some sign among us that we been changed by that presence.

We go looking for love, for approval, for validation, in all sorts of places and ways. Look here today. Your invitation to this table, this feast of Christ, comes neither as the successful one, nor as the one of ill-repute – but rather first, foremost, and entirely this: as a child of God, loved, graced, forgiven. Some a lot, some a little. But all some.

Grace will not get you to the top of the corporate ladder. It will not get your voice heard, your beliefs embraced, your kids into the best colleges. Grace does not transcend real life. Rather, it fills it, walks with us through it, with Christ as our guide.

What's grace, the woman asked.

It is life for today.

And hope for tomorrow.

In the name of the father, and the son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.