

The Extravagance of God

Psalm 40:5-10a You, LORD my God! You've done so many things-- your wonderful deeds and your plans for us-- no one can compare with you! If I were to proclaim and talk about all of them, they would be too numerous to count! ⁶ You don't relish sacrifices or offerings; you don't require entirely burned offerings or compensation offerings-- but you have given me ears! ⁷ So I said, "Here I come! I'm inscribed in the written scroll." ⁸ I want to do your will, my God. Your Instruction is deep within me." ⁹ I've told the good news of your righteousness in the great assembly. I didn't hold anything back-- as you well know, LORD! ¹⁰ I didn't keep your righteousness only to myself. I declared your faithfulness and your salvation.

1 Corinthians 1:4-9 I thank my God always for you, because of God's grace that was given to you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ That is, you were made rich through him in everything: in all your communication and every kind of knowledge, ⁶ in the same way that the testimony about Christ was confirmed with you. ⁷ The result is that you aren't missing any spiritual gift while you wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will also confirm your testimony about Christ until the end so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, and you were called by him to partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

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Some years ago, I worked for a small family owned business in Dallas. The man who owned the company was a wealthy retired banker. He and his wife had a daughter who was probably in her mid-thirties at the time. Unknown to all of us who worked in this little company, the owner and his wife also had a son. The father and son had had a strained relationship, with the father disapproving of his son's career choices and the son chaffing to do his own thing. During the first or second year off at college the son disappeared. His father reported the disappearance to the police and even hired private detectives to try to track down his son. After several years, the family gave up hope and sealed off the memories and pain with mental scar tissue. About ten years passed in silence.

One Monday morning I came to work and the little office was all a-buzz. Over the weekend, while she was on a business trip in another state, the daughter was having a drink at a club and recognized the bartender as her long-lost brother. She got him to agree to talk to their father over the phone. Eventually, after several calls over the next few weeks, the son agreed to move back to Dallas. His father offered him a job working in the shipping department and the family was reunited at last. There wasn't a dry eye in the building! Several people remarked that real life was stranger than fiction. It was hard to believe that this family, who had gone through so much pain, was now living in a storybook ending.

Luke 15:11-32 Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. ¹² The younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.' [In that ancient culture, it was as if the son was saying, 'I wish you were dead so I could inherit my share. Why don't you just go ahead and give it to me now, and I won't have to put up with you and wait for you to die.] Then the father divided his estate between them. ¹³ Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living. ¹⁴ "When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. [Remember that, for the Jews, pigs were classified as unclean. This was disgusting, repulsive work.] ¹⁶ He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.'"

²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. "While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. [Despite the insults he had suffered, the father was still looking and hoping for his son to come back. The father had no pride, no sense of decorum; he lifted the hem of his robe and ran out to meet his son. He didn't ask if the son was sorry. He didn't say, "You fool! I hope you've learned your lesson!" He didn't say, "Do you have any idea how much you have hurt me?"] ²¹ Then his son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.' [This is the point where most of us would be a little wary. We'd wonder if the son had really changed. We wouldn't want to risk being hurt again. And we certainly wouldn't want to risk a lot of money on the relationship. It just wouldn't be prudent! Tell you what, boy, I'll give you a job out in the fields and we'll see how things go. I'll give you a job on the shipping dock.] ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! ²³ Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting ²⁴ because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

[The son is restored to full position. What an extravagant thing to do! Don't give him a spare robe. Give him the best robe. Don't go eat with the field hands. Kill the fatted calf. That was extravagant, because that calf wouldn't live to sire or bear more calves to increase the herd. Daddy wasn't buying pizza because he had cashed a dividend check. He was withdrawing principal to throw a lavish party and serve prime rib.]

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. ²⁶ He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. ²⁷ The servant replied, 'Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.' ²⁸ Then the older son was furious and didn't want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. [Again, the father swallows his pride. Now it's the older son who's being a pain. And the father seeks out his son and begs him – begs him – to come join the party.] ²⁹ He answered his father, 'Look, I've served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you've never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.' ³¹ Then his father said, 'Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.'"

"Everything I have is yours." The older son has never had any faith in his father's generosity. He hasn't trusted his father's love. Which son caused his father more grief – the one who couldn't wait to get the money and ran away? Or was it the one who was there all the time but still didn't recognize and trust his father's extravagant love?

All of us at that little company in Dallas were impressed with a family coming back together and trying to heal old wounds. They were working to forgive past hurts and to gradually restore trust – and maybe eventually, restore love. They were good people in a world where many harbor grudges and pick at emotional wounds that never heal.

We find the events in that Dallas family to be almost unbelievable. And so we really have a hard time believing one of the main points Jesus was trying to convey in the story that we call The Prodigal Son. We want to think that it's all about a sinful son begging for forgiveness. It isn't. The returning son doesn't ask for forgiveness. He begs for a job! In our misconstruing of what the son does, we brush over the extravagance of God, the father. God reaches out to the son. With great joy, God throws an extravagant party. There's no caution, there's no prove that you've changed, there's no hesitation. God gives extravagantly. As Bishop Spang puts it, "God loves wastefully!"

Like the older son, we can overlook the extravagance of God. We can fail to trust that God loves us wastefully and fail to recognize the gifts that we have been given as a congregation.

The apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in Philippi and told them that Christ emptied himself. He came to live with us as a fellow human being. Beyond that, he was a servant, a slave in the way that he served others. He humbled himself by being God-with-us, Emanuel. What extravagant love that is! Have we so lost our sense of wonder that we fail to be overwhelmed by such an expression of total commitment to be with us? Jesus held nothing back! (Philippians 2:1-8)

We need to remember the grits. You know the story. A man from up north was driving through Alabama. He stopped to eat breakfast at a café in a small town. He ordered bacon and eggs and toast. When the waitress put his plate in front of him there was a mound of white stuff on it. "What's that? he asked. That's grits. I didn't order grits. Honey, you don't order grits – they just come!" God's extravagance is like grits. It just comes. The love, the spiritual gifts, the rain and the sunshine – it just comes.

Some of us see ourselves as the prodigal son in the story. At some point we've made a mess of things and we'd like for God to rescue us from the starvation we're experiencing, the emptiness in whatever form that is gnawing at us. Many of us, perhaps most of us are a lot like the older son. We've been around for a long time. But we don't believe, we don't trust, that God is dependable, that God is extravagant in generosity, that God loves us wastefully. And we forget that Jesus said, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32 RSV) What a rich and meaningful passage! Fear not! Why shouldn't we be afraid? Because it makes God happy to give us the kingdom. God gives us the kingdom by blessing us in extravagant ways that empower us to live a kingdom of God life, to live as citizens in the realm of God. In the letter that Paul wrote to the Philippians he said, "God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes." and Paul tells the church in Philippi to "carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling." God is extravagant in her love for us, in being one with us to the point of experiencing the torture and death of the cross, and in giving us the blessings we need to do God's will here and now.

Paul wrote letters to another group of Christians in the city of Corinth. Now, if you ever get to dreaming about how perfect, how pure, how ideal the early churches were, then you need to read the letters Paul wrote to the Corinthians. They were misbehaving. They were split up into cliques. They were a mess! And yet, despite all of that, Paul told them that they were made rich through Christ. God's extravagance had been showered on them. He said, "You aren't missing any spiritual gift." God has, and will, bless you with everything you need. God is faithful, and you were called by him to partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Fear not. You have the gifts you need and God will extravagantly hold you up. Isaiah preached that ^{CEB} **Isaiah 40:31** "those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on wings like eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary. Therefore, work in partnership with Jesus Christ your Lord.

Last week, I found myself caught up in a small example of how God's extravagance plays out. Cathy and I were at a conference at Montreat, sometimes called "Presbyterian Heaven." At lunch on Friday there was a man sitting at the end of the table wearing a beautiful sweater. As he got up to leave, I gave him what my Dad would have called a "left-handed compliment." "If you ever get tired of that sweater, I think I could squeeze into it," I said. He looked a little surprised and thanked me like he wasn't sure if he'd been given a compliment or not. On Saturday morning during a break before final worship, I felt a hand on my shoulder and a plastic bag dropped into my lap. In it was this sweater. After I picked my jaw up off the floor I realized I didn't even know his name. I went over to him, asked him his name, and tried to thank him. "No, no," he said. "Thank you! This was the most fun I've had all

week!" We are blessed so that we may be a blessing. Fear not! Empowered by the extravagance of God, step out and live – and give – boldly! Amen!

Sisters and Brothers,

Go into the world; cherished and forgiven

We go, assured of God's grace.

Go into the world; called to be happy, called to be holy.

We go, assured of God's Spirit.

Go into the world; renewed by our time together.

We go, assured of God's faithfulness.

Go into the world; serve with energy and hearts full of compassion.

We go, assured of God's love. Thanks be to God!