



**SUNNYVALE**

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*From the Pulpit*

**Sermon: “Discovering God in the Distant Place”**

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ January 24, 2010

**Luke 15:11-32**

**Genesis 28:10-16**

In the next couple of months as we move towards Easter I want to begin a sermon series called Discovering God. Not that God is lost, or even hidden, but sometimes we don't naturally think to look for God in the places or among the people where God is in fact at work. To discover God is to expand our faith and realize that God is often found -- that God surprisingly *hangs out* -- in places and with people that *we* might well choose to avoid and dismiss. To discover God is to be open to new ways of serving and to new places to serve believing that our call of faith is not a call to control God but to find out where *God* is at work -- to find out where the flow and momentum of God's grace is moving -- and to throw ourselves into that current and be swept up in that work.

But the truth is that too often, instead of discovering God the church has tried to *direct* God. Too often the church has presumed itself to be the guardian of God and the sole repository of divine grace. We here at Sunnyvale Presbyterian over the years have also spoken at times about "*taking* God out into the world". In our best intentions we meant of course that we wanted to live our Sunday faith out in the reality of the rest of our week. But it could sound like -- and probably at times in reality it *reflected* -- the belief that *we* had to take God into the world because God was not already there and would not *be* there without us and our help. Obviously there's an arrogance to that perspective that greatly reduces and domesticates God and which fails to recognize God's concern for the whole world.

We still need to discover God because God's grace reaches wider than our expectations; because God's presence can be found in surprising, even scandalous places. This was what was at the start and heart of the opposition that Jesus encountered from the religious leaders of his day: they were shocked at what he said, offended by the people he hung out with and scandalized by the things he did. Luke 15, the chapter in which our Scripture reading occurs today *begins* with the words, "The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not *at all* pleased. They growled, he takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." The Bible then says "their grumbling triggered this story". And then Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the prodigal in order to try to help these narrow-minded religi-ots *discover* that God's grace and love is a reckless and even shocking thing. Jesus hopes the passion of the story will soften their hard hearts.

Before I read the text I want to say the reason we're starting this series with Luke 15 is because we first have to discover the God who is *for us* before we can discover and be a partner with the God who is *for the world*. If we ourselves feel distant from God it makes it hard to feel like a disciple of Jesus partnering with God in the world.

Over the course of my ministry I have turned to this story of the prodigal many times. I have preached from it, taught on it, and rewritten it into 2 different contemporary dramas. I've presented it in tableaux, portrayed it in mime, and even approached it once from the perspective of the fatted calf! All because it captures so powerfully a message we desperately need to hear because not all of us have a strong a sense of God's grace in our lives. As a result we can become people of unstirred souls and untouched lives who have a strange and arid immunity to the reality of God's love.

(Read the text Luke 15: 11-32)

No matter how far away the son has wandered; no matter how distant and estranged he feels; no matter how hopeless hope may seem - it cannot break the memory of home nor take away the thought that maybe, just maybe, he could still go back.

And no matter how hurt the father's heart has been; no matter how much he has had to endure; no matter how long he has suffered - it cannot break the memory of his child nor lessen his desire to hold him again.

Famine and feast; fear and forgiveness; confession and grace--Between these polar places we live our lives. In the midst of famine there remains the memory of home. In the place of feast, there is a welcome for the wayward child. Grace happens when the hunger for home is met by the welcome of love. In this parable Jesus tells us God does not give up; he does not turn away. For all of us who feel lost and beyond hope the gospel says, come home: the loving arms of the father are waiting.

Grace is a word we use a lot in the church but it's not always well understood. Grace is unearned and undeserved love. What we may fail to grasp in Jesus' parable – especially in the context of the culture in which it was told -- is that there is in fact a scandal to grace because the son did not get what he deserved—he didn't have to make atonement for his sins—did not have to live a few months as just a hired hand.

Several years ago the Mercury News ran an article about a 14 year old boy in London named Peter Kerry who took his father's passport and credit cards and ran away. Three days later he telephoned his parents in London from a hotel 6800 miles away in southern Malaysia. The son told his dad, "They are after me."

The father, John Kerry (a different John Kerry), said that his son had *previously* run away to Scotland and Paris. The article finishes with this quote from the father: "He's a strong-willed boy (you think?) He's a strong-willed boy and will do these things. And I know that when we get him back home safely -- and soon I hope -- he will continue to do this." Now, when I read that I feel like someone ought to jerk a knot in that boy's chain. I mean first he ran away to Scotland, then Paris and now Malaysia where he ran up the tab on his father's credit cards—at 14 years old!!! And all the father can say is, No doubt when we get him back home he will continue to do this!?

See, suddenly I understand the older son in the parable who is incensed at the wanton irresponsibility of his younger brother and who wants the father to first make the boy pay or at least show that he has learned his lesson.

But no; the father takes his son back fully and opens to him the best that the family has. The prodigal didn't deserve it anymore than Peter Kerry did. *And yet* the prodigal's father takes his wild and wandering son back home with open arms of grace.

Grace is God's acceptance of us in spite of all we may have done or failed to do. Grace is the wonderful, even unfair, gift that welcomes us home no questions asked, no penalties given. It's what the prodigal discovered in the love of his father. It's what is offered each of us through Jesus Christ!

I believe we all are looking and listening for a word of grace in our lives. Charley Brown is lying down outside with his head on a rock staring up at the sky. He says to Lucy, "If I tell you something will you promise not to laugh? I promise," Lucy assures him. "This is very personal and I don't want you to laugh. You have my solemn promise. OK. Sometimes I lie awake at night listening for a voice that will say, "We like you Charley Brown." .....Lucy breaks into laughter.

You have to wonder how many nights the prodigal son lay awake wondering if anyone really liked him anymore. His new found friends who had helped him burn through his money were now gone; the owner of the swine cared more about the pigs than the boy; even his older brother was unwilling to welcome him back. But the *FATHER*... the father watched and waited and when he at last saw his son coming down the road, he ran—the *father* ran—and his only concern was how to best celebrate his son's return.

Amazing grace! Enough grace that the once lost prodigal knows he has been found; that a once dead son knows he yet lives. This is what we first discover about God: that we can never run farther than God's mercy; that we can never fall deeper than God's grace – that we can never be so lost as to not be found by the arms of love. Amen.