

“Building a Home of Grace”

2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:11-32 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – April 7, 2019

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words that we might open our hearts to your
extravagant grace and respond with joy. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

Last week we talked about how this story has both a prodigal son, who wastefully spent his inheritance on dissolute living, and a prodigal father, who wastefully pulled out all the stops for a party when his wasteful son made it safely back to the farm. There is pointless waste, and then there is holy extravagance. As Christians, we are called to know the difference and follow the father's example, which as it turns out, is easier said than done.

Last week, we mostly focused on the relationship between the father and the younger son in this story, and by extension, our relationship with God who is extravagantly gracious with us the way the father in this story is. Today, I want to look more at the relationship between the two brothers because that aspect of the story has a lot to say to the present moment here at VLMCC, especially with regard to our shared life of stewardship. Our current stewardship story began about a year ago, and it was something like this story. Things had been rolling along, but suddenly something shook up the status quo. Our budget was suddenly experiencing a famine. We realized that we couldn't keep going the way we'd been going; we were not operating sustainably. So we turned to God and heard a word: we were invited to re-

commit ourselves to being church, to cultivating vitality and growth, in ministry but also in membership. We were all asked to re-evaluate our relationship with the church, to see whether we are “all in” and what sorts of new commitments that might require. In response to this invitation, some of you increased your regular giving, for which I continually give thanks. We weren’t expecting that to be enough, however, so we built in a back-stop: we created a budget for 2018-2019 that assumed we were going to pull \$10,000 from our investment funds to help underwrite our ministries this year. The plan was that the Board would evaluate our financial situation every few months and pull \$2,500 as needed. And then God saw us coming and ran out to meet us with arms wide open. Three times this year, the Board has looked at our financial situation and come to a clear conclusion that we did not need to pull that emergency \$2,500. In January, we celebrated four new members, and on Easter, we’ll be baptizing two more. We have been experiencing God’s extravagant grace. We’ve moved through the first part of this story.

And now we have arrived at a different moment. One of the most interesting things about the parable of the prodigal son is that Jesus doesn’t tell us how it ends. He just leaves us hanging, with the father out there in the field, pleading with his older son to come in and join the party. This is a useful place for us to stay for a moment. As I mentioned in my devotional message in this Friday’s weekly email, we’ve been talking about growth for a year now without mentioning very often the word “change”. When you have a church full of older brothers who have been working for

God and obeying God's commands for years, and then suddenly a bunch of new people show up, who haven't put in their time yet, some of the same dynamics of resentment can develop. How do we avoid being like that older brother when all these new people have new ideas and different ways of doing things? How do we cultivate hearts that are eager to go in to the party and celebrate the arrival of these long-lost siblings?

We have said from the beginning that this will be a three-year process of creating a new mindset of continual growth; the goal is that we will be different in three years' time. We are going to be wrestling with our resistance to change that entire time (and beyond). As humans, we have a bias towards being settled; life is constantly changing, so we often want church to be refuge from that, a place where things are predictable and thus comforting. But God is going to continue inviting us to come in to the party, and I hope that we will. There is so much happening in that moment of decision. "You killed the fatted calf for *this son of yours*," we cry. And God replies. "We have to celebrate and rejoice because *this brother of yours, this sister of yours, your beloved sibling*, was dead and has come to life!" Did you notice how the relationality gets turned around there? The older brother wants nothing to do with his father's other son. But that's not how it works. If we want to claim our identity as God's children, we cannot pretend we have no connection to God's other children, our sisters and brothers. We cannot act as though they have less claim to shape what happens here in God's house. Indeed, the parable breaks

down when it comes to most of our new members and friends, since they weren't out and about in the world engaged in dissolute living, but were instead living worthy lives just without being here yet. The ideas and experiences they bring are just as worthy of being part of what God is doing here. We need to recognize that the tendency to be wasteful in pointless, self-centered ways is just as present inside the church as it is outside the church. Only when we truly center our lives on God can we direct our extravagance toward the life of love that is bigger than ourselves. New and old alike, all of us need help shaping our hearts to receive and reflect God's extravagant grace in ways that are holy and fruitful.

So there is much we can learn about the possible pitfalls along the road of growth, from this moment of decision in the field. I pray we will all choose to go on in to the party and celebrate. There is an even bigger moment coming though, that speaks more directly to the new moment in our stewardship story. What happens after the party? What happens when the younger son gets integrated back into life on the farm? What happens when, one day soon, the father is no longer around, and those brothers have to learn to run the farm together, without dad to guide them? How do we sustain the legacy of grace?

In many ways, the stark financial realities we thought we were facing a year ago did not come to pass. But shifts in our church family over the past year mean that those same financial challenges, while briefly delayed, are now becoming real. We are facing the first year of running the farm without dad around. We are being called to

find a way of balancing the older brother's faithfulness with the younger brother's willingness to take risks, in order to sustain this home of extravagant grace in ways that honor God. I will be the first to admit that it's a little bit terrifying. But maybe that's a good thing. It's important that we not assume we can do this on our own. Only when we're fully aware of our reliance on God can we respond faithfully to God's invitation into the body of Christ. We don't do this because we're qualified; we do it because, as Paul says, we've been made new creations. We've been invited to become ambassadors for Christ, because of how Christ is continually transforming us. Those brothers are going to hold that farm together after dad is gone because of the ways in which his love transformed them. We will sustain the legacy of grace here at VLM because of how God is continually transforming us as a church. "I am confident of this," we read in Philippians, "that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."

We didn't embark on a campaign for growth simply because we weren't meeting our budget. We launched this three-year effort at revitalization because we were ready for it. God had been preparing us all along. And now phase two has begun, and we're working without a net, or at least with one less net than we had before. Us kids are going to have to make it work by ourselves now. We are now the generation in charge of sustaining the legacy of grace. And I pray that we will keep going, with all the same joy and confidence and faith and open-heartedness with which we began. Part of that enthusiasm lives in our response to this stewardship

campaign, when we're asked to put our money where our mouths are. The Second Act has begun, so it's time for each of us to claim our part and step onstage. We are all here to learn how to be extravagant in holy, fruitful ways, rather than follow the world's demands to live only for ourselves. Each of us has a role to play in building this home of grace. Each of us has a contribution to make. When we bring them together, God multiplies them into extravagance. Grace abounds. Let us respond with joyful, thankful hearts. Amen.