

Problem: We talk about being wasteful with our waste, but can we be wasteful with God's grace?

-Jack Johnson song: "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle". (Play the first part: until 1:47) "If you're going to the market to buy some juice. You've got to bring your own bags and you learn to *reduce* your waste." This song is super catchy and a wonderful tool for kids to learn not to be wasteful. And I don't want to downplay this concept with waste. Our OSLC Green Team is looking into better recycling for our church building and community (you'll hear about in the upcoming months) which is awesome! However, I want to broaden this concept for us beyond recycling.

-"Prodigal" literally means wasteful. It's easy for us to see how the first son in our story today is wasteful, because it's mostly with physical monetary things. But, we cut this story incredibly short when we see only the acts of the first son as wasteful. This isn't just a simple story of greed and then forgiveness like our wider society has boiled it down to. It's a story that is about all three characters being deeply flawed and wasteful beyond just the squandering of inheritance.

Solution: Both sons and the Father in the Prodigal Son story misunderstand the workings of grace.

-We focus a lot on the first son's spending of all this money on luxuries and prostitutes, but let us look at the wastefulness from the very beginning. The first son's asking for his inheritance, especially in 1st century middle eastern culture, wasn't just waltzing up to his father and asking for a money order. What his request actually means is: "you are dead to me." This request is a huge slap in the face to a culture which is based on honor and respecting your elders.

-But the Father is wasteful, too: living in a reality of honor and shame. Because the son's request would bring such shame to the household (for generations to follow), granting it makes the father appear foolhardy, not generous. He is being wasteful with his grandchildren's and great grandchildren's livelihoods and reputations by doing what he is doing. Also, by welcoming him as the father does, greeting him before hearing a word, he appears ripe for exploitation. How do we know the first son is *actually* sorry? He does not wait for his son to express contrition (only a brief confession) before restoring him to full status in the household, symbolized by the robe, ring, and sandals. As head of the household in this culture, the father is putting many lives at risk by what seems to be rushed actions and judgements.

-This begs the question: can one be wasteful with grace? Is this what grace looks like? Is God's grace a grace so eager to give and restore? Will not those who value responsibility and propriety consider it dangerously permissive?

-This brings us to the other son. This is the son that seems to get forgotten a lot. "I once was lost, but now am found" always gets put on the first son. All the second son gets is a "poor eldest son" standing in the corner of the party. The way many times we portray this eldest son is "whiney". Come on! Get a grip! Join the party! Quit being such a brat! But this cheapens the parable considerably and takes away what I think is the main focus. Don't let it shock you, but I think we put too much focus on the first son and the father (this shows in the pointless debate of what do we title this parable? The Prodigal Son or the Grateful Father). I think the point that Jesus is making with the entire story parable is *actually* the wastefulness of the second older son.

--How is the older son wasteful? The older son has wasted his relationship with his dad. He lost his chance of having a real relationship. All he thought about was having a real reward. He doesn't see himself as a son, he sees himself as a hand. He is a character that has not acknowledged the love of his father, but works to earn some kind of status/ranking. His brother threatens this status/ranking and is the outsider. He hasn't understood his father's grace and love the entire time. We can see this in the exchange with his father where he calls the other son "this son of yours." The Father reminds him "This brother of yours."

Implication: For us, grace is something given, not earned. It is something that can open our lives up to deeper living and relationship with God and neighbor if we are not wasteful.

-Church folk fall into a trap, often I believe, when they write off the elder son as different, an outsider, or especially reprobate and self-righteous. He is the *consummate religious insider*, for he understands and articulates *the scandal* of God's grace better than any theologian. Look at who Jesus was talking to when he was telling this story: the Pharisees and Scribes (the church insiders). The people he is telling this story to are like you are me!

-What does it mean to live into God's grace and not be wasteful?

-Abby and I had our wedding rings made Jim in Stillwater, MN by an incredible ring artist who had a lot of stories about ring and weddings. One story he told me was a woman who was on her second marriage bringing in her great grandmother's wedding ring and diamond. This ring was a gift from her great grandmother who specifically told her before she died that she gave it away to be used again in another marriage: either as another wedding band or as some kind of pendent. It's a gift to remind you of your family, said the grandmother. But, the ring was almost 70 years old, beat up, tarnished a little, and very simple. This woman's first marriage was to a MN Vikings professional football player whom she thought would not approve of the ring. "It was too simple and I knew he wanted the diamond to be bigger," she told Jim. So, she hid it in a safety deposit box and they bought a ring that resembled a little bit more of the couple's status. The marriage failed and she ended up selling/giving everything away. Now she was in love again (truly) she admitted to Jim. And her second fiance insisted that she make good on her grandmother's wish to fix up and use the ring that was given to her. She cried as Jim cleaned up the ring and suggested some additions to "make it hers." "It's beautiful," she said. "I couldn't get myself to see that before."

-How do we respond to and not waste the gift of grace? I think many of us are more like the eldest brother than we care to admit. We want to earn our way and feel like we have worked for our status. We feel threatened by those who "don't work hard like us". But this isn't how love and grace work, certainly not the love and grace from God. The grace of God is something that is given no matter who you are or what you do. It's irrational and doesn't make a lot of sense. Yet, it's key, I believe, to our deepening of relationship and faith.

-"Son, 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."

-Maybe this is a clue to us to not be wasteful. Yes: reduce, reuse, recycle. But more importantly, let's be freed to take the real gift of grace out of the safety deposit box. To be able to live out grace as a gift and let it deepen our relationship with our God, our Creation, and ourselves.

Amen.

