



“SORROW AND SCARCITY”

SCRIPTURE: LUKE 15:1-3, 11B-32

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, March 30, 2025

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Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. 15:2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 15:3 So Jesus told them this parable: 15:11b "There was a man who had two sons. 15:12 The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. 15:13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. 15:14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. 15:15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 15:16 He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. 15:17 But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 15:18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 15:19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" 15:20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 15:21 Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 15:22 But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe--the best one--and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 15:23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, 15:24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. 15:25 "Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 15:26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 15:27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.' 15:28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 15:29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 15:30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 15:31 Then

the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 15:32 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.'

We are born with an expectation of belonging. It's wired in us that we will have community, that we will have purpose, that we will be welcomed and that we are worthy of connection and support.

This is the deep instinct that helps us survive—there is safety in numbers—and there is a place for us in the family of things. We are not born with an inferiority complex. We are not born with a wariness of strangers. We are born ready in connection and we are born expecting that connection to continue.

Skin to skin contact after birth is a way to imprint that sense of safety and belonging. Smells, sounds, touch, tastes, and eventually sight become visceral data for how our bodies navigate the world—what is safe, what is threatening, who can we trust, who is dangerous.

We are born expecting to belong in an elemental way—it's in our cells, in our muscle twitches, our digestive systems, our sensate experience.

Inevitably, we all encounter experiences of some order of magnitude that this expectation is not always met in trustworthy ways. We all have our attachment wounds—the places where our body learned disappointment, learned fear, learned hurt. These wounds have different orders of magnitude depending on our life experience. But we all have them to some degree. And we can have experiences as we grow from even healthy attachment that break trust or harm our capacity to believe in belonging.

The world is full of reasons to be wary. It feels like we are in a time of an especially acute challenge to our embodied need to belong and to trust our surroundings. The grief is existential—not just about loss and death, but about a fundamental absence of something we need to be fully alive.

The fourth gate of grief is the attempt to bring description to this existential grief—what we expected, but did not receive.

Frances Weller's, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, describes this fourth gate of grief “difficult to identify” and as the embodiment of something we may struggle to describe.

Healthy villages nurture healthy people. Without a healthy village, people struggle to be healthy. It is a poignant window into what ails us in American culture. As we become more insular, more cut off, the village becomes less healthy, and so do we.

There are all sorts of markers in American culture for how we have become estranged from the village. Evenings are spent watching screens instead of sharing stories about the day. Social connection comes more often through technology rather than in proximity to the everyday rhythms of life together. Families share fewer and fewer meals together. Communities have less and less opportunity to connect and solve problems together.

Maybe this is why hurricane relief feels so healing even in the midst of how strenuous and heavy it is. It is an emergence of the village. A way of belonging and of experiencing feelings of worthiness and connection.

Weller goes deeper than this need for being valued and connected, he describes the way we are wired to blame ourselves when trust is broken, or when our sense of belonging is harmed. In the absence of a village to say “what happened to you was wrong” we blame ourselves—then creating narratives of unworthiness, narratives of being defective, unlovable, outside what belonging could or should be.

The healthy village is not one where harm does not occur, but it is a place that can respond to the hurt by acknowledging the hurt was wrong and that it is not a threat to that person’s worth or value in the community.

Herein lies the collective grief of our current cultural moment. American culture has been long schooled in the narratives of competition, in the narratives of commodification—that our worth is only in our winning, that we are only worth what produces wealth or what makes others wealthy. These narratives of white supremacy capitalism create a fundamental rupture in our sense of belonging. It is no wonder we feel so adrift and on edge—when we so deeply need a different way to engage in community.

Our social arrangement in a capitalist economy where dominance and supremacy are valued, where poverty and oppression are seen as an acceptable price to pay for the wealth of a few, where conformity is enforced through intimidation and white washing not just history but the present moment—it is death dealing to the humanity we are born with and born expecting from others.

Right relationship is the repetitive practice of welcome and belonging to our irreducible uniqueness. The deep grief we feel when the world does not meet us in ways that

dignify who we are and how we are made—this is a grief that shapes the course of our lives, shapes our capacity for healing, shapes our sense of possibility.

And sometimes we can't bring consciousness to the truth of what we have lost when our humanity is not fed until we encounter a place where it is fed.

Weller describes another layer of this grief around our expectation of purpose—our authenticity, our gifts, our unique identity is what we bring to the world. And part of our wiring around expecting belonging is also expecting purpose. We are born with the expectation that who we are will have a place in the village—that what we have to offer will be needed and valued. Weller calls this “spiritual employment.” When we are told who we are or what we bring are not valued or not what the world needs, we begin the work of trying to retool ourselves to fit the mold of what will be valued. We have to find a way to pay the bills, in other words, and often have to leave behind or neglect our gifts because they are not productive, not valued, not seen as an asset.

There is grief here—sometimes that we hide away so deeply that we lose track of those gifts, of the joy we feel when we can spend our time doing what comes easy to us, when we can freely share what we have to give. This grief is tender. And hard to touch. There is a rawness to it, because it goes to the heart of who we are and how we are made. It goes to the heart of our most elemental need to be welcomed and valued by the village.

Coming to the parable of the long-lost son coming home through this gate of grief brings us to a poignant space of recognition. Sometimes we don't know what has been missing until we have an experience of belonging that we didn't expect.

It would be easy to focus on the wayward son—the one who got to come home again—and get a new and fresh welcome complete with forgiveness and abundant celebration. This part of the narrative is attractive and shiny—you can mess up and still come home and people be happy to see you. It can be mistaken for a story of second chances. But the parable includes the son who had been there all along living his life the way he had been instructed. If this was just a story about forgiveness and second chances, it wouldn't include the other son.

You see this is really a story about belonging—and about being valued and feeling worthy. The son who had stayed home and been dutiful and hardworking can come off like a spoiled brat—but he's really a wounded child just like his brother.

He had been there all this time, but maybe he had never really trusted in the depth of his belonging. He says he'd been working “like a slave.” That doesn't sound like right

relationship to me. He says he has never disobeyed a command, that doesn't sound like agency to me. He says he's never had a celebration just for him. That doesn't sound like the joy of a healthy village to me.

In Godly Play after the kids hear a story they are asked "I wonder what might be missing in this story."

Maybe what's missing is some more space for the father and son to grieve what hadn't been between them, something neither one of them had been able to see until they had an experience of what true belonging feels like. What is missing is just a few more sentences in which the father is able to see the son who is there so clearly saying that he has doubted his belonging. The second son had been working so hard to earn his father's favor, to prove that he belonged, that they both may have forgotten to tend to the most elemental thing we all need—to know that we belong not because of what we achieve or produce, but because of who God made us to be.

What's missing in the story is an acknowledgement that the wayward son's return wasn't just about welcoming him back home, but about recommitting to tending to a sense of belonging for everyone who calls this home. It is the grief of not completely trusting our belonging that gives rise to anger and reactivity—the fear of love lacking, of there not being enough love to go around—the sorrow that comes from perceived scarcity—from being the one left with nothing, the one left behind.

This sense of belonging is our best hope, Grace Covenant. This resolve to see and believe in the worthiness that each of us has our birthright. Right now the powers and principalities are coming for our belonging, they are coming for our sense of worth and value. The more we can shore up our shared sense of belonging and worthiness, the more we will be able to hold on to our humanity.

They can't take away our commitment to one another. They can't take away our resolve to practice right relationship. They can't take away our capacity to look into each other's eyes and say "you belong and you are worthy of love and liberation."

(turn to your neighbor and share that assurance with each other—let the village be healthy so that we can be strong for whatever lies ahead.)

Thanks be to God.