

Introduction:

- A. When I came to this church I thought a lot about two things. For one thing, I thought how students had a couple very striking church models in this area—Willow Creek and Harvest Bible Chapel. They were thriving and they each had a distinct approach to shaping a church. Their recent troubles were not in view then, but I felt that students needed other thoughtful ministry models. I prayed that we here at Village Church might be that. But I had no clear sense of what kind of model we should be. Gradually over the years we *did* become a model, and eventually we found language to describe it—the church as family. As you know, my book, *Feels Like Home*, is about us—about how we’ve learned to be a church family and, in the process without trying, we became a model. Just this week I received an email from a church planter in Montgomery, Ill., who began, “*Thank you for writing **Feels Like Home**, which is making an eternal impact within our 1-year-old church plant! This fall, after celebrating our 1st Anniversary, I read the book and then gave away a case to our church family.*” Our family modeling to their family.
- B. The second thing I thought about came from a song I remembered from the ‘70s by Noel Paul Stookey, of Peter, Paul and Mary fame. It was a story song about a man who, with his family, escaped the city with all its turmoil and settled to a quiet life in the country and waited. This was the verse I’d think about:

*John Henry Bosworth, 1984 [the year of apocalypse]
 The sky is red, the city's dead
 And there's a knock upon the door
 Every piece of Scripture, every prayer he prayed*

Had brought him to this moment

Of this particular day

"Open the doors" he cried,

"Let the brothers and the sisters inside

I got everything to give now and nothing left to hide."

I felt those last lines might be a promise from God to me of a day that would come to Village Church if I just took care of this flock. I imagined some day in the future when people would just start coming—lots of Jesus-hungry people—and if we did our job as a church family in the *little* days our church would grow *big* with all those people. I've thought about that over and over across the years, and waited. Only recently did it dawn on me that God did exactly that, only not all at once, and I'm so grateful.

- C. There's a great biblical theme that has run through the years here and become our identity, a sweet river of life flowing from Jesus himself: it is **grace**. **Grace is getting something for free that you cannot earn and would never deserve.** God's grace, in saving us but also in infusing our lives, runs like living water through our years together here. There's a line in **Heb 13:9**, "*It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace.*" So today let me once more strengthen your hearts by grace.
- D. God's grace in Christ is the theme of all the Bible. I could turn anywhere in this whole wonderful book and find a worthy text, but my favorite begins this way: "*There was a man who had two sons...*" [**Luke 15:11-24...**]
- E. When Jesus told this story he was holding up a mirror to the cheating tax collectors and other sinners who had gathered around him. They had done to God what that son did to his father. They had squandered their inheritance and found themselves spiritually hungry and homeless. And

when Jesus told this story, they saw themselves. Lots of people have. *Illus.*: One Sunday morning years ago, Sue, who worked at the gas station where I got coffee, asked what I was going to preach on that day. “*The prodigal son*,” I told her. “*You know that story, don’t you?*” But she had never heard it. So I told it to her, and when I finished I said, “*Sue, that’s how God feels about you.*” Tears came to her eyes because she saw herself in the mirror.

- F. It’s easy to see the picture of God’s grace at the end of this story but did you see it at the beginning, when the father let that foolish son have his way. It’s not generally what earthly fathers should do actually, giving away the farm like that, but that is what God has done. The Father in heaven allows us in our foolish self-centeredness to claim *his* wealth as our own and to squander it till perhaps we’ll finally become hungry and homesick; till we finally come to our senses. It doesn’t always turn out that way, but that is how God in his grace works. **Often it is nothing more than an aching hunger and a vague plan to bargain with God that sets a person on the road home to the Father.**
- G. Nothing is more beautiful than v.20: “*But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*” What happens in a moment like that? What happens to such a son or daughter? The father, who had given his son his entire inheritance, now gave him what he would have never asked for. The son, starving as he was, felt a new and greater longing to belong than he had never known before.

In all that far country none of that money ever bought him such security as he found in his father’s embrace, nor was any kiss there so precious. In that famished far country,

once his money ran out, “no one gave him anything.” But in his father’s arms he was richer than anyone he knew.

Here, I think, is where a son or daughter’s heart really changes. Here is where he *really* “came to his senses.” Not among the snuffling pigs, but in his father’s arms. Here is where the repentant words he’d rehearsed found his heart. Here is where he truly turned—repented—and loved his father. He’d planned to say, “*make me like one of your hired servants,*” but those words fell away useless once he was in the grip of his father’s grace.

- H. Did you notice how this father seems oblivious to the son’s sin. The son wasn’t: “*I have sinned against heaven and against you,*” he said, and nothing could have been more true. But grace changes things. We always call the young man in this story the *prodigal* son. The word means “*exceedingly or recklessly wasteful.*” That is certainly how the proud Pharisees saw the sinners gathered around Jesus. And they were. They had ignored God, squandered their religious birthright, and were no longer worthy of being called sons of Israel. But in Jesus’ story, the father said, “*This son of mine was dead.*” Not prodigal. Dead. “*He was lost,*” he said. Lost and dead are terrible conditions, but the condemnation is gone out of them. That’s why Jesus died for our sins. To take away the condemnation.

If you happened on this scene without knowing the backstory, all the hoopla would make you think that this son had survived a harrowing journey or come back from a war and that everyone had given him up for dead. You’d think he was the darling of the family, his father’s favorite. But if you know what this son had done, like the servants and neighbors knew, well, you’d be stunned because this son had been such a disgrace.

The best robe, the ring, the new sandals. Why, you'd never know he had been a swineherd and beggar. The fattened calf? Why, you'd never know he had been so hungry that he envied the pigs. The feast, the music and dancing. Why, you'd never know he had broken his father's heart and been the outcast of the community. What you *would* know is, "*This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*" And what you might *not* realize is that Jesus said that their celebration is what happens in heaven among the angels when one sinner repents.

- I. There are two prodigal sons in this story. One whose last hope was grace and the other who thought he was too good for it. Vv.25-32... Some of us are like that older brother in this: you never wandered far from the Father. You have always been near him, always known him. But I do not know of any among you who begrudge God's grace to prodigal sons and daughters like this son did. You rewrite this story. You joined the Father's party. You celebrate grace.

So that brings me to your legacy of grace here at Village Church.

I. BE A FAMILY WHO ALWAYS CELEBRATES GRACE WITH OUR FATHER

- A. Everyone here surely identifies with one of these two sons. Some of you have told us stories of days far from Jesus, when you were headstrong and foolish, or in some cases, just plain lost and lonely. But you remember some moment when you *came to your senses* and hoped against hope that God might let you back. Do you remember the morning Ed Williams, our resident blues singer, told us how God rescued him from a terrible life consumed by drugs? Or

when Nancy Molinari told us how a professional baseball player led her and Don to Christ? Or when Kim Dragos, who came as a self-described “angry atheist,” fell into the waiting arms of Jesus?

Others here have known the Father for a long time and have no stories of squandered gifts or pigsties but you know what it is to surrender your stubborn self-righteousness, to get low, to come as a child to Jesus.

- B. Some here have learned about grace *after* coming to Jesus. God’s grace doesn’t stop working at the celebration banquet. Grace gradually permeates our lives. The older brother *became angry*. “*All these years I’ve been slaving for you,*” he said, “*I’ve never disobeyed your orders.*” Sometimes that slaving takes a while to release.

Illus.: When I was first here there was a wonderful guy whom everyone loved. Warm, earnest, smiling, gifted, and successful. But inside, where none of us could see, he was dealing with explosive anger. As I recall, when it finally got the best of him he saw a Christian counselor who led him into God’s grace. It turned out that the poor man was simply exhausted by all his efforts to be good—to do everything expected of him—everything *he* expected of himself. Even though he was a Christian he had lived his whole life *slaving* because he thought that’s what God required. That relentless tension welled up in his anger.

But when he grasped the loving, embracing grace of Christ he just broke inside. Tears often came to his eyes. “*It’s all about grace!*” he’d say again and again. He was a man astonished. Like a blind man who received his sight he walked around blinking at the beauty of God’s grace. Like a lame man dancing, talking about grace every chance he got.

Jesus says to you, “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*” [Mt 11:28] Be a church who knows how to rest in God’s grace. Help the *harassed and helpless* to rest in Jesus. That’s our legacy.

- C. It’s very important we not miss the backstory here. This story is only possible because of the man who told it. Without Jesus this story wouldn’t be possible. Do you remember why? Because “*all [people] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*”—in other words, they couldn’t go home nor would they! But the verse continues “*and are justified freely [declared righteous in God’s sight] by his grace through the redemption—the purchase—that came by Christ Jesus.*” [Rom 3:23-24] “*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

So when God our Father looks at us he even doesn’t see forgiven sinners. He sees *righteous sons and daughters.* Jesus’ perfection has been put to our account. Incredibly, God now sees *us* as if he were looking at *Jesus*. That is why we are welcomed home to the Father! That’s why there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

But that’s not all, because God the Father raised his Son, Jesus, from the dead. Now all who put their faith in Jesus to save them from their sins also receive Jesus’ everlasting life. Death itself has lost its sting. For us, “*to die is gain.*” I have seen many Christians face death and I tell you, God’s grace meets them and leads them gently home.

- D. So as you gather together week after week celebrate the grace of God our Father through our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who makes a way for both the prodigals and the proud

to come home. The one requirement for membership in this congregation is your story of coming home to the Father through Jesus. Sing for the joy of it. *“My sin—O the bliss of this glorious thought—my sin, not in part but the whole, has been nailed to the cross and I bear it no more! Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!”* *“Every debt that you ever had has been paid up in full by the grace of the Lord. Be ye glad!”*

- E. Now you all have become agents of God’s grace, to one another, and everywhere you go. God’s grace is in your blood, stirring within you a love straight from the heart of God. Grace is with you in your goings out and your comings in. Don’t forsake meeting together because here, together, your hearts are *“strengthened by grace.”*

And here’s an astonishing thing: you and I embody this grace of Christ with us wherever we go. **1 Jn 4:17**, *“In this world we are like Jesus.”* You are salt, giving people a thirst for Jesus. You bring his light to people who didn’t realize how dark it is. Remember the old poem by Beatrice Cleland I’ve quoted to you:

Not only in the words you say,
Not only in your deeds confessed,
But in the most unconscious way
Is Christ expressed.

Is it a calm and peaceful smile?
A holy light upon your brow?
No, more! I felt his presence when
You laughed just now.

For me, ‘twas not the truth you taught,
To you so clear, to me so dim,
But when you came to me you brought

A sense of him.
And from your eyes he beckons me,
And from your lips his love is shed,
Till I lose sight of you, and see
The Christ instead.