

The Great Escape from Grace

Our text is today's Gospel, The Parable of the Lost Son, from Luke 15 we read:

¹¹ . . . There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

Dear Friends in Christ,

It was just about this time of the year, early Spring in the year 1991, that the event occurred which is known to this day as 'The Great Escape From Grace.' (Don't let the theological overtones fool you, this was not a doctrinal matter.) You see, back then I was pastor of a different Grace Lutheran Church, this one had a Lutheran Elementary School with about 100 students.

Two of those students decided that school was drudgery, a complete bore, a prison. These two young men made up their minds they were going to run away from Grace, run away from school, run away from teachers and tests and homework. They planned an Escape From Grace. They had between them the small fortune of \$15 and with that they would bankroll their flight away from school and out into the real world.

Oh, they had planned it well, planned it for days. They told only a few chosen, close friends about their plan and then gave to them a false destination to throw off any pursuit. They chose an opportune time, slipped away from the playground supervisor and out into the open fields of central Michigan. The Great Escape from Grace had begun. After a somewhat frantic search by the principal, the pastor and several parents, word came that they were spotted at a fast food restaurant near the main highway.

As the dragnet closed in on these fugitives, they were unaware they were about to be caught. They sat blissfully ignorant that they were being observed by the authorities, giddy in their new found freedom, exuberant in their new life away from pencils and books and teachers' dirty looks. And ultimately they were surprised because they were apprehended so soon.

The Great Escape from Grace earned these two young men several things: 1st severe parental punishment at home, 2nd the loss of many privileges, TV, Nintendo games and phones, 3rd they earned two weeks of in-school, isolated detention, one in the principal's office, the other in the pastor's outer office, and 4th it earned them the wistful admiration of their peers. It earned them the status of legends in the annals of the school. For they had done what many only dream of doing. They had run away to find their freedom.

And that's not just a childish ambition. That's an emotion many people have in their hearts, a desire to find yourself by escaping, a desire to run away from what is dull or what is difficult, to run away from a relationship that isn't working, to run away from responsibilities and commitments. It's a sense that there's a whole big, wide world out there for me if only I could shake off all that's holding me back. I could actually live life and enjoy life and do what I want to do. I could be free if only I could get away.

Jesus talks about this idea in the parable we consider today. He gives us the example of a young man who tried to be free by escaping. He completes the picture by giving us the example of a son who stayed behind and built around himself a prison of duty and responsibility. This story teaches that freedom is found neither by escaping nor by building walls of obligation around ourselves, but in quite a different way.

It is this truth that we find as we look at The Parable of the Lost Sons, The Great Escape from Grace. In the parable it is clear right away that the younger son wants something more out of life than what he's getting. He goes to his father and says, "Give me my share!" and the father gives it to him just like that. But money by itself is not enough for the younger son. He wants something more. He wants to get away. Get away from the watchful eye of his father. He doesn't want to have his father look at him at the breakfast table with those wounded eyes of his just because he came in at 3 in the morning stinking of wine. He doesn't want to be made to feel guilty. He doesn't want to answer to anyone for what he does. So off he goes for a distant country. He puts as many miles as he can between himself and those sad, old eyes. He wants to be free. He wants to escape.

The teenager who sees "everybody else doing it" and seeming to have a great time, knows exactly what the son felt. The husband and wife who just had the same old argument for the 500th time know what this younger son felt. Anyone who's ever heard the siren song of sin, "Follow me and be free. Follow me and be happy" knows exactly what the younger son felt.

At first it seems as if he finds what he's looking for. He plays the game by nobody's rules but his own. He does just as he pleases. He lives a wild and reckless life. Free at last. Free at last! Or is he? Well, no. The day comes when he discovers that he is not free at all but the worst kind of slave.

¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

That's the kind of slavery sin brings. He's slave to needs he can't take care of. From being a SON in his father's house, he has become a SLAVE working for someone else. He's a slave to his own unfulfilled desire for wretched, unfulfilling things. A prisoner of his own desires. There's nothing worse than that! And he's a slave to the feelings of GUILT and SHAME, of looking at himself and being disgusted with what he has become.

The first beam of light in this darkness comes with the words: ¹⁷ . . . *he came to his senses.* He wakes up and realizes he is living in a dream world, a lie, a mirage of freedom which is no freedom at all. He thought he could be free by escaping when all he really needed to 'be someone' was to be a SON. How sad and how true: it is only when he had lost all right to be called a son (and he thought he'd lost those rights forever) it is only then that he realized what it was truly worth to be a son. But he figures, "Any form of acceptance from my father - even if I can only be a hired hand now - has got to be better than feeding pigs."

With a heart full of hurt, guilt and shame he heads toward his father's house. That's the first step in being set free. Now he's ready to find freedom in the only way it comes: through the pardoning love, the amazing grace of his father. The very same grace from which he'd made his great escape.

²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “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.” ²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’” ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.’” ²³ “Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.” ²⁴ “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

Is there anyone here who can remain cold or indifferent to this tremendous picture of God’s love? The Father sees his son while he’s still a long way off. That means the father’s been watching for his son, eyes scanning the horizon, all the time he was gone, hoping that one day . . . one day his son would return. And when the son returns there is no scolding, no berating, no punishment, no anger, no “how could you do this to me?” There is only full and free forgiveness. He is completely accepted again and welcomed back. He is a son with full honors. The father’s forgiveness is instant and total.

Now why do you think Jesus told us this story? Well, of course he told it to warn against trying to be free by letting yourself become a slave to sin. And he told it to give a picture of God’s forgiving grace. But a much deeper reason is to set us free from the worst slavery of all, when Satan tells you - after you’ve committed some sin - “Now you’re lost! Now you’re despicable! Aren’t you disgusted with what you’ve done? Aren’t you disgusted with what you’ve become? How can you expect God to accept you back as if nothing happened, as if you had NOT sinned?” When Satan hits you, a believer in Jesus, with this lie, when he tries to ‘rub your nose’ in your past wrongs, when he tries to get you to despair . . . show him this parable. Show him the father’s love. Show him the way the son was accepted back with full honors. This text is for that occasion. As a believer in Jesus you have forgiveness from your father that is instant and total.

Now we come to the other son, the other one who lost his freedom. But he lost it in a different way.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.” ²⁶ “So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.” ²⁷ “Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.” ²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.” ²⁹ “But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.’” ³⁰ “But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

This older son maybe never realized what a slave he was until the day his younger brother returned. But then, boy did he explode with anger and frustration. Why? It’s not hard to figure out. When the younger brother came back, the older brother suddenly realized that he had been living in a dream world too. If the younger brother had believed that freedom was found in escaping from a loving dad, escaping from grace, the older brother thought that freedom was found in earning his dad’s love, by being good.

You see, he was going to be the GOOD SON, not like that useless brother of his. It was typical that he was out in the fields when his brother returned. He was the responsible one, the one who carried on, who did what was expected of him, the one who made his father happy not sad. And he thought, “Because I’m the good son, that’s why my father loves me. After all, I deserve it. I fulfill all my

commitments. I carry out all my obligations. So I've earned my father's affection. I've earned the right to be what I am and to have what I have."

But he was very wrong! Wrong, not in thinking that his father loved him, because the father truly loved him, but wrong in thinking why his father loved him. Because by thinking of his father's love as something he earned, he made himself into a slave. And that's just how he puts it. Verse 29 *But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you . . . '* And all those years the deep anger and resentment against his slavery was growing and increasing his feeling of being trapped until finally it all blew up when his younger brother returned.

What got him, what really got him, what hurt him right to the bone was the way his father so casually gave his love away, the love for which HE had worked so hard. And so it seemed to him, all those years of sacrifice, years of getting up when he didn't feel like it, years of working hard when others were having fun, all those years of sacrifice seemed worthless. What good is it if dad just gives his love away?

Now, of course, God does give his love away. But it is not a casual thing on his part. It cost him dearly. It cost him the only Son who really had earned the right to be called a Son. It cost the life and death of Jesus. God's amazing grace is free, but never cheap when you consider what it cost our Lord.

What this older son needed to understand . . . what his father pleaded with him to understand . . . was this truth: ³¹ *"My son," the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. It has always been yours. You never had to earn it. It doesn't come to you on a cash and carry basis. I don't want you to be my slave, I want you to be my son whom I love with all my heart. I want you to serve and obey me not because you HAVE to but because you WANT to.'*

You and I need to take stock here, too. Ask yourself, "Why do I live a Christian life?" "Why do I serve God?" "Why do I obey God's commandments?" Yes, sometimes you have to force yourself to do what is right just because it is right. But if that tells the whole story about your relationship with your Heavenly Father, why you serve and obey him, take heed. You're letting yourself become a slave. And God doesn't want slaves. He wants sons and daughters. He doesn't ask you to earn his love. As a believer in Christ, everything God has belongs to you and you belong to God always and forever.

He tells us, "This is what I, in grace, have made you. I have called you by name. I have claimed you as my own. You are my child. Now just be what you are. You are my child. Now live as my child, not because you HAVE to, but because you WANT to as a joyful, thankful response to my love."

The Great Escape from Grace. We attempt it every time we choose our way instead of God's way, every time we follow our reason instead of God's Word, every moment we live for ourselves instead of for him. And each time, through faith in Jesus, our loving heavenly father welcomes us home with his amazing grace.

Let us pray:

Gracious Lord, God of Love and God of Forgiveness,

Keep our hearts truly free, free from sin and its wretched slavery and from its shame and guilt.

Keep our hearts free from letting our joyful response to your love become a deadly duty.

Keep us free to live for you now while we await your welcome into our heavenly home. Amen.