

A colleague of mine was preaching a sermon series on the parables of Jesus one time and almost decided that he would leave out the story of the prodigal son. "Too overexposed," he thought. "We're too familiar with it; it's lost its shock value in our culture today." But then after he thought about it, he decided he would be pilloried if he put his congregation through a sermon series on the parables of Jesus and left out the prodigal son. So he chickened out and preached the sermon.

Another colleague, Tom Tewell, has made the declaration that if he only had one chapter of the Bible to share the essential good news of the gospel, he would pick this 15th chapter of Luke that we heard today.

Still another colleague, writing for preachers, cautioned about this story: don't explain it. People know what it means. Parsing out its meaning would have all of the affected awkwardness of an explained joke. Let the story do its job, he cautions.

Well, the prodigal son story is a favorite of Christians all over the world. Why do you suppose that is? What is it about it that speaks to us so deeply?

Without belaboring the story itself, I'd like for us to consider it again today, because I believe all of my callings are right. It is overexposed, and yet at the same time it is unequivocally the gospel.

You all know the characters in the story of the prodigal son. You've heard them this morning. I don't need to describe them to you again, but this might bear repeating: you all know these characters. You know the good guys and the bad guys. You know the people who can't be bothered to care about anybody but themselves. You know the great big softie.

Moreover, we identify with these characters; that is why the story works. We can readily identify, some of us, with the son who stayed home, did what he was told, and then at the end of the story seethed, while his profligate younger brother, who had had a highway paved for him with his parents, came back and everything was just swept under the rug. Or so it seemed. Some of us can identify with that character. I, for one, can actually identify with the younger brother, but not for dissolute living, mind you. My oldest brother defuses bombs for a living, and my older brother is an emergency physician. No one has ever created a TV series or a movie about the emergency work of a pastor.

So I get it – I get it – when he says, let me just make my own way. Just gimme a little seed money. I might fail but at least it will be my way. And then of course, there's that beleaguered parent, the one who is affronted by the younger son, harangued by the older son. He stands in the middle and says, "Can't we all just get along?"

Oh, you know these characters. You may in fact be these characters. They don't require explanation. But they do bear repetition.

My colleague, as I said, was worried that he thought the story had become too commonplace, too ordinary, that they'd lost their scandal because we've heard the story so many times, and

surely it is out there to be heard. Henri Nouwen wrote a wonderful book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. He based it on the wonderful, classic Rembrandt painting by the same name. The story appears in art and literature. There is no doubt that repeating the story could possibly make it commonplace. But do you know what? Grace should be commonplace.

I'm not at all convinced that making something commonplace means that we render it irrelevant as a result. No, I am much more convinced that taking something into our being, making it a part of who we are, so that we know these stories, and they arise unbidden when we need them – no, that's not ordinary or common. I don't think this story loses power at all, because we've heard it before. I believe it gains power precisely by the fact that we have heard it so many times. We have heard it over and over again. We've seen it in different contexts. We've heard it when we needed to hear it about ourselves, or someone else.

To be sure, this story is plenty scandalous, no matter how often we read it, because it is a story about grace. And grace is by definition scandalous at its heart, because it is fundamentally and completely unfair. Or else it's not grace.

In some ways, I think that's the point of the story. That's why Tom could pick the 15th chapter of Luke as the essential good news of the gospel, because it is a ringing affirmation that grace is never, ever ordinary, even if it is commonplace.

You all know by now my working definition of grace: it is the undeserved, unmerited, unconditional love of God. Grace is not something that should ever be taken for granted. Unconditional, undeserved, unmerited to be sure. But not to be taken for granted. That's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer cautioned against as he cautioned Christians against relying upon what he called cheap grace. Cheap grace is where we have become so accustomed to grace, so familiar with it, so blasé about it, that we actually begin to believe that because God has done absolutely everything necessary for our salvation, that what we do doesn't matter.

The early church considered a version of this and called it anti-nomianism. After they considered it, they found it wanting and determined that in fact it was a heresy, with good reason. What we do does matter.

In our reformed, Presbyterian tradition, we are so gun-shy about works-righteousness that we will push back against it as hard as we possibly can. We want it to be crystal clear to anyone listening to us, that whatever needs to be done for our salvation has already been done by God in Christ Jesus - that is the essential message of what Paul wrote to that church in Corinth. In Christ, God has reconciled the world to God's own self. It's never something we do for ourselves, because if it's something we do for ourselves, it is unreliable. But in our zeal to be clear about that, we have just about worked our way all the way back around to anti-nomianism, to the belief that what we do doesn't matter.

What we do does matter. To believe otherwise is to believe in cheap grace. To be sure, God has done everything for our salvation. Grace is undeserved, unmerited, unconditional; there is nothing we do to earn it; there's nothing we do to procure it. But if it is to have any transformative meaning for our lives, we do have to acknowledge that our actions and sometimes our inactions matter. That this story is scandalous is no doubt, but it's scandalous precisely because it points to a very demanding reality - that God is working through Christ Jesus for the reconciliation of the world and inviting us into that same reconciling relationship.

And the way that we can do that, the means by which we are able to act as ambassadors for Christ, is through the belief that grace is real. Grace is commonplace, but that even still, what we do does matter.

If we paid attention of the story, we noted that the actions of the young man did indeed yield consequences. You know how it goes. He wandered off into the Far Country, and there, he squandered it all in dissolute living. You can choose for yourself what exactly that means. The legacy of our Victorian and Puritan forebears would leave us assuming that means sex and liquor, hard drugs -- that's the way they read it. Certainly the older brother had his opinions about how his younger brother had spent the money. But the Bible doesn't say. The story doesn't tell us what exactly is that dissolute living. It could've been anything.

That actually is part of the beauty of the story. It could have been anything. We don't know exactly what went wrong. We just know that something has gone terribly and irrevocably amiss.

So let me ask you a question. Have you ever in the course of your life had that shot at and missed feeling? Have you ever had that moment when you realized, well, it turned out okay this time, but it could've gone the other way so easily. If you have ever had that sickening realization that it could have gone the other way, then you have a point of entry into this story.

Or maybe, maybe in the course of your life, you have hit bottom. Maybe you have gotten to the end of the road, so you know just exactly what it looks like. You've been there. You know that the marriage can't be saved and shouldn't be. You know that if you keep this up, this way of living, your life is going to be tremendously shorter, and tremendously harder. Maybe you've been there. Or perhaps you've felt the weight of judgment bearing down on you, as every move that you make to try to correct the previous move goes more wrong than the one before it. And all of a sudden you realize that the disaster cannot be averted any more. It is right there in front of you, and your family is going to have to pick up the slack. If you have ever been in any one of these places, you know, I hope, the power of the unconditional love of God -- that no matter what we have done, no matter how we arrive that situation, we find ourselves most in need of grace, that however much sin there is in us, there is more grace in God. There is more mercy in God. I hope that if you've ever been in that place, you have known what it is to experience the in-breaking of God's kindness.

The story tells us that no one gave him anything. Scholars hypothesize that those pods in question were probably carob pods. I found that interesting as I was reading this week. Carob pods had no nutritional value. They won't do anything but make you feel full. And yet the story tells us that he gladly would have filled himself on them. And nobody gave him anything.

That ought to bother us in a story about grace, don't you think? That nobody gave him anything? There's something about that Far Country. It's an inhospitable place. We're supposed to understand somehow that it has some allure for the young man. We are to understand by extension, that the Far Country has some repulsive allure for us. Disaster doesn't identify itself and announce its coming, or we would avoid it! However he came to be at that place at the bottom, it had some allure at the beginning, some reason that he wanted to follow it.

In the Far Country, you are apparently on your own. In the Far Country, if you fall, there is no

safety net. You can sleep with the pigs all right, but don't eat their food. We need them fat for the harvest. In the Far Country, no one gave him anything.

I don't want to live in the Far Country. What about you?

But I'm not so sure we have to go very far to find the Far Country. Most of us would do just about anything to avoid it, but while we hope it's a long way off, the journey's not so far, is it?

Do you know where the Far Country is? The Far Country is rural Appalachia. The Far Country is inner-city Atlanta. The Far Country is in country clubs, brothels, suburbs, and schools. You don't have to go far to find the Far Country. If you know what you're looking for, you'll see it. You'll know when you've seen the Far Country.

We have a mission team in New Orleans right now, and I bet they've seen some Far Country. We have volunteers that go just about every week to work in a food co-op to distribute food to the needy, because they know that the Far Country isn't miles and miles away. It's right around the corner. If you need directions to the Far Country, ask our mission team. I bet they can tell you where to find it.

Nobody wants to go to the Far Country, but we know it's out there.

What troubles me about this story is that in the Far Country nobody gave him anything. The story tells us he came to himself. I don't know exactly what that means. Some folks interpret it graciously. Did the son recognize the error of his ways? Knew he was on the right track? Wanted nothing more than to go home and be where someone loved him again? Others are a little more skeptical, more cynical. They think he simply came to his senses with the realization that he was starving to death. He knew that if he could come up with a good speech, hit the road, and get on back home, where even the servants had a good deal – just come up with a good cover story. The old man was always a softie. He'd take you back any time. And of course you know the rest of the story. It's a picture of grace. He comes home. His father spots him across the field, hikes up his robe and goes running out to meet him. It is a picture of grace. New robe, new ring, big feast, everyone invited.

And then right there, in the middle of the party, we hit the Far Country again. That older son comes in and truly, he has done everything right. He did all the things anyone would want their child to do. He stayed in school; he got a good job; he took care of his parents. Then all of a sudden, there we are, in the Far Country.

"I have worked for you. I have slaved, and you never threw me a party." Right there: Far Country. Such a lonely place, the Far Country.

Did you know that you can do everything right and still wind up in the Far Country? Did you know you can play by the rules and work hard and ... your job's gone overseas ... the Far Country. You can work at a marriage until you don't think you have anything more to give to it. One day your spouse comes home and says, "That's it. There's nothing left between us." And there you are in the Far Country.

But who am I asking? You all know this. You know the Far Country can be a moving target; that's what makes this story so poignant. Everyone knows what it is to hurt. Everyone knows

the capricious appearance of pain and suffering, that you can gamble and lose, and there you are in the Far Country. Or maybe something just a little bit simpler. Your children grow up and you realize they don't need you quite as much. You've got the rest of your life ahead of you. And it looks like Far Country. Or you can just work and work and work, and feel so under-appreciated. And somebody else gets the party. And there you are in the Far Country.

Karl Barth took this story in the mid-twentieth century and turned it on its head. He said that Jesus is the one, who, in a world where no one would give him anything, gave everything, and journeyed into the Far Country to bring all of us back to that land of graciousness and goodness.

Maybe you saw the movie "What Dreams May Come" a number of years back. It was a vivid movie, set in a fictitious afterlife. The main character is Robin Williams. He plays a physician who has been killed in a car accident. He is preceded in death by his two small children. When he wakes up, he finds himself in this vivid world of light, color, playfulness and joy. The reunion is truly and deeply joyful. But then one day, he realizes something is terribly amiss. His wife, whom he has always been able to see up to this point, is no longer visible. We learn that in great despair, she has ended her own life. With the end of her life, she is plunged into further terror and darkness into a world devoid of joy, color, and light. Realizing that nothing can ever be right as long as it is thus, the Williams character plunges himself into the same world of darkness and pain in order to bring her back out again. As he reaches her, he reminds her of joy, the joy that God wills for us. Joy is what we are created to live. With joy, he brings her, by the hand, back into the world of goodness, light, color, and playfulness.

That is what this story is about. That is what Jesus does for us. He comes to pull us back from the possibility of a world of darkness, or even from a reality of a world of darkness, into a world that is marked by goodness, light, joy and playfulness. Into a world "where no one would give him anything" the Son journeyed into a Far Country to bring us out.

We are everyone in this story. We are the older son, and the younger. We are the waiting Father and Mother. We are everyone in this story. For all of these, for all of us, Jesus journeyed to the Far Country, so that the world, where no one gave him anything, could be transformed.

That is what we will gather together on Easter morning to celebrate, the very transformation of the world. Paul reminds us today that we are charged to work for that transformation right now. That is what makes this, at the end of the day, a story about joy, because the darkness does not win. The darkness never wins.

We celebrated the sacrament of baptism today. We made the most extraordinary promise. We promised that whether at the age of three or 33 or 93, we will go with him, even into the Far Country, because that is where Jesus found us. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.