

Psalm 32  
Luke 15:1-3; 11b-32

Fourth Sunday in Lent  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
March 31, 2019

## **Amazing Grace**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Our Psalm for this Fourth Sunday in Lent focuses on the joy of forgiveness and being in a right relationship with God. This blessedness comes about through the grace of God. St. Augustine thought so much of this Psalm that he had it written out and placed upon a wall near his bed. Listen to these words from Psalm 32...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

Following the parables that Jesus told of “The Lost Coin” and “The Lost Sheep,” our Gospel Lesson presents Jesus’ parable of a lost son—commonly known as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Some would argue that a better title would be “The Parable of the Loving Father”—a father who runs to embrace a wayward son coming home. Listen to these words from Luke 15:1-3 and 11b-32...

### *Sermon*

In 2007 a woman in Oregon won \$1 million on a scratch-off lottery ticket. Two weeks after collecting her money, when she had already spent \$30,000 of her winnings, authorities discovered that she had bought the ticket under a false identity, using the credit card of her boyfriend’s deceased mother. Her winnings were seized and she was prosecuted. But how did they find out about the crime? Only because, after she had won the million, she had continued to use the fraudulent credit card! She had a million dollars in hand, but she was still charging credit on a dead woman’s credit card.

Why would someone risk a fortune that was certain, only to gamble on risky behavior? That might be a question we would ask the prodigal son, if we could meet him face-to-face. This young man has a loving home and family, his physical needs provided for, and an inheritance “in the bank.” Why does he take his father’s money and run? Why do any of us turn from the goodness of God for a lifetime or in a momentary lapse? It’s hard to say why someone will gamble when the fortune is already theirs.

The focus on the son in this story has been often contested. He may be the one with the most action, but the father is the most compelling character. Rebellious sons are a dime a dozen, but it’s the father whose behavior surprises us. His graciousness begins long before the closing part of the story. He hands over the fortune that his son demands, even though that premature request for an inheritance means the son is rejecting his identity and his family. Then he stands on the porch and watches the boy go out into the world, knowing his son well enough to know what he will do with the money, knowing the world well enough to know how it will respond.

The son goes down the wrong road, but the father stays put, staring at the spot where he saw his son disappear, watching the road in hopes of seeing him again. When the son does appear on the horizon, prepared for chastisement, servanthood, even banishment, the father stands still no longer. He runs. It’s hard for us to understand what an incredible picture this is unless we know that in those days the men wore long robes, and men of age and stature did not run. It was not dignified. But this father loved his son more than his dignity, hiked up his robes, and ran to reach him.

The son in the story experienced exactly what the book of James describes: Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” (Jas. 4:8) Even when we squander the incredible fortune

that is God's love and gamble on pleasure that never lasts, God does not withdraw in anger or resentment. No, he runs up the road to meet us. What amazing grace!

In chapter 15 Luke joins three stories linked by a common theme—rejoicing over the lost which is found. The tax collectors and sinners have drawn near to listen to Jesus, while the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling about his eating with the likes of such. “If he were a true prophet, he ought to support holiness. He’s a distinguished leader, and his behavior is giving us a bad name.” *But*— “to seek and save the lost” is Jesus’ stated purpose, as noted in his conversation with the outcast tax collector, Zacchaeus:

For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10)

People do get lost—in a variety of ways, and for a variety of reasons. Relationships are broken and people get hurt. It happened then, and it happens now.

Misguided choices can cause broken relationships. Ministers and their families are not immune to such hardship. You’ve heard me mention Robert Redford’s 1992 movie *A River Runs Through It*, based on Norman Maclean’s (*McClain’s*) semi-autobiographical book. The story is set in western Montana at the junction of great trout rivers. The author’s father is a Presbyterian minister and an avid fly fisherman. Rev. Maclean and his wife raise two sons: Norman who will become a teacher and writer, and Paul who will work for a newspaper and excel at fly fishing. Norman marries and raises a family. Paul leads a life of drinking and gambling—ending up getting killed in a fight. Heartache through misguided choices was no stranger to these good parents and loving brother. And yet the message in the words of elder son Norman is: “You can love completely without complete understanding.”

In our parable Jesus tells of a son who wanted what was coming to him and he wanted it now, not as was the custom of dividing property after the death of the father in accordance with

his last will. And what this son did with that inheritance was his own business. What he did was squander his fortune in riotous living in the far country, throwing “the pearl of his soul into a cup of wine.” Finally he was reduced to feeding pigs, a humiliating and shameful job for a Jew. Then one day, while sitting among the swine, the young man came to himself. He realized that at his father’s home, even the servants were better off than he was here with the pigs. So he would swallow his pride and head for home.

The father had been waiting in that peculiar agony of hope and fear—hope that the son would return safely, fear that he would destroy himself in the far country. And, upon seeing his son in the distance, the father ran to him and embraced him. Neighbors would have seen the rags, the dirt, the bare feet, the disgrace, but the father saw his *son*. Then the son confesses:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer  
worthy to be called your son.

Before he can finish with the words, “Now make me one of your hired servants,” the father shows that regardless of what the son has done, he is still his son, still loved, still wanted. Clean clothes, a ring, and shoes were brought for him. And the father, like the finder of the lost sheep and the lost coin, called for a celebration, a feast. That which was lost had been found; that which was dead was alive.

However, there is one who resists, and he is the elder son. The brother who had stayed home, but whose heart was lost. We don’t know if he ever celebrated or not. He was certainly in no mood to rejoice now, resentful of the love this “rotten brother” is shown, and as it turns out, resentful of all his own years of service to his father—seeing them as a kind of unrewarded slavery, instead of his contribution to a kingdom that is already his.

John Newton, who wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace” in 1779, could easily identify with the prodigal son who wasted his inheritance. For as a young man, Newton left home and went to

