

THE GIFT OF ACCEPTANCE



**His father saw him and...ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him
Luke 15:20**

Scripture:

Psalm 103: 1-5; 10-12

1. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
2. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—
3. who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
4. who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
5. who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
10. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.
11. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
12. as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

Luke 15: 11-24

11. Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons.
12. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them.
13. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.
14. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need.
15. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.
16. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.
17. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!
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;
19. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' "
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.
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."
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.
23. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate;
24. for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.



THE GIFT OF ACCEPTANCE

This morning I would like to share some thoughts about one of the greatest gifts we can receive, and one of the greatest gifts we can give someone else: the gift of acceptance.

My thoughts are based on the familiar story Jesus told about the father who had two sons which I just read. In the story, when the prodigal son returns home, his father catches a glimpse of him coming far down the road. The father feels so much compassion, he startles everyone who is watching him as he runs towards his son and embraces and kisses him. That is why I like to call this story the Parable of the Waiting Father.

You know the story. The father yields to pressure from his younger son and gives him in advance his share of his father's wealth. The son leaves his family and lives it up for as long as possible, until the money runs out.

He gets part-time work feeding pigs – the lowest job a Jewish boy could ever do! Soon he realizes the pigs are eating better than he is. He decides to return home and seek his father's forgiveness, even if it means giving up his birthright as a son and becoming a servant. At least at home he will have bread to eat like the servants.

When he finally arrives home, his father is overjoyed, and calls for a celebration banquet, saying, "This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The waiting father also gives his son a gift of far more value than the inheritance he had given him earlier: he gives him the gift of his unconditional acceptance.

FROM PASTOR MARY BULLIS

Pastor Mary Bullis writes: This parable is one of the most well-known stories in the Bible, and probably most people's favorite parable that Jesus ever told. For one thing, we can all relate to it. Everyone has a weird family... The young son rehearses his speech as he journeys home, "Father, I have sinned against you, and I'm not worthy to be called your son. Let me work as your hired hand..."

But as he makes the final turn on the road home, while he is still a distance off, his father sees him and comes running toward him.

MEN IN THAT DAY DID NOT RUN

Continues Rev. Bullis: "Now here's something important to know. Men in that day did not run. Ever. Think about it. Have you ever tried to run in a long robe? The only way to do it is to hike up the robe above your ankles and then try to not get it caught up between your legs as you run. "Great men never run," said Aristotle. But the father runs, in front of all his family and neighbors, and embraces his son and smothers him with kisses. The son starts stammering his prepared speech, but his father [interrupts him]."

GOD ACCEPTS US JUST THE WAY WE ARE

I believe that Jesus is telling us in this parable that God accepts us completely, just the way we are, even before our confessions of unworthiness and our promises to change, before we can try to do anything to earn God's unconditional acceptance.

To be told that the Creator of the Universe accepts each of us as a person of worth and potential is not only Good News, it is also as startling and unexpected as the father's joy. "This son of mine was dead and is now alive; he was lost and now is found."

THE OLDER BROTHER

Later in the parable, the father also reminds the older son of his ongoing acceptance. The elder brother stays at home, helping his family, doing all that he was asked to do, working hard and not causing any trouble. His father's public display of acceptance for his younger brother is very frustrating for the older brother. He says he is definitely not going to the party.

The older brother is angry and confused. He tells his father, "These many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a banquet!"

It's hard to blame him for not wanting to go to the party. And if you're an older sibling, you know exactly how he feels. You know what it's like when your younger brother or sister is never punished, even though you are. You know what it's like when you work hard and do everything

you're supposed to do, and yet your younger sibling still gets all the attention.

"I work like a slave for you, father, and I've never disobeyed you. And yet you've never even fixed a goat stew for me and my friends. My brother goes off and squanders everything and he gets veal!"

ACCEPTANCE OF BOTH SONS

His father answers, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is your." At this moment, the elder son's inability to welcome home his brother has the possibility of also driving a wedge between himself and his father. However, his father shows his complete unconditional acceptance of both his sons. He does not require an explanation or a confession of remorse. His acceptance is not a reward to be earned. His acceptance is a free, undeserved gift that both sons can always count on. He doesn't love them because of what they deserve. He just loves them because of who he is, not because of who they are. In other words, Jesus is telling us that God loves with an unconditional love and grace.

I think one of the most important ways to deepen family relationships is through mutual acceptance – husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters.

TAKE PEOPLE ON AS IS

Former President of San Francisco Theological Seminary, Dr. Ted Gill, once told the graduates at a seminary graduation: "Giving someone time to measure up to our standards is not forgiveness; suspending our judgment until someone can pass our muster is not acceptance. Getting along with others – that is our business; valuing variety – that is our joy. Taking people on, as is and whether or not – that's what life is all about."

FEELING ACCEPTANCE IN THE FAMILY

A number of years ago, pediatrician Dr. Haim Ginott wrote a widely read book entitled "*Between Parent and Child*." He recorded a discussion he had with several women about feeling acceptance in their family.

He describes a scene between a husband and wife at breakfast. "Suppose it is one of those mornings when everything seems to go wrong.

The alarm doesn't go off (the power went off and then came back on) and the clock is forty-five minutes slow; the kids want one thing after another, and before you know it the bacon is burned.

"Your husband looks over at the burnt bacon and says, 'When will you ever learn to make bacon?' What is your reaction?"

- **First wife: I'd throw it in his face.**
- **Second wife: I'd say, 'Fix your own blank bacon.'**
- **Third wife: I would be so hurt I could only cry and leave the room.**

What would your husband's words make you feel toward him?

Anger, hate, resentment!

Question: Would you fix another batch of bacon?

Answer: Only if I could put poison in it!

And afterwards, would it be easy for you to carry on with your day?

No, the whole day would be spoiled.

Then Dr. Ginott offers an alternative: Suppose the situation is the same. The bacon is burned, but your husband, looking over the situation, says, "Gee, honey, this has really been a rough morning: the alarm, the kids, and now the bacon."

- **First wife: I would drop dead if my husband said that to me.**
- **Second wife: I would feel wonderful.**
- **Third wife: I would feel so good that I would hug him.**

Why? Nothing is very different. The kids still want things, the bacon is still burnt?

That wouldn't matter.

What would make the difference?

I would feel glad that he didn't criticize me, that he showed he was with me and not against me.

**Dr. Ginott asks, "What is it that helps change mean feelings into loving ones?"
He answers his own question:
"The fact that someone understands you,
without blaming you, and
without telling you how to improve."**

THE GREATEST GIFT

I, too, believe that acceptance changes angry or hurt feelings into loving ones; it changes negative feelings into positive energy. The feeling that someone understands and accepts you just the way you are, without your having to earn their forgiveness and love – that is the message of acceptance we have from God through His Son, Jesus Christ. That is a gift we can share with others, and it is perhaps the greatest gift we can give another person.

WITHHOLDING OUR ACCEPTANCE

At the same time, there are situations when we feel more inclined to withhold our acceptance of someone else. Sometimes that's easier to recognize when we see it in another person.

Charles Schulz, in a classic Peanuts comic strip, illustrated this with a discussion between Charlie Brown and Lucy.

Charlie: All it would take to make me happy is to have someone say he likes me.

Lucy: Are you sure?

Charlie: Of course I'm sure.

Lucy: Do you mean to tell me that someone has it within his or her power to make you happy merely by saying such a simple thing?

Charlie: Yes, that's exactly what I mean.

Lucy: Well now, I don't think that asking too much, I really don't. But you're sure now? All you want is to have someone say, 'I like you, Charlie Brown,' and then you'll be happy.

Charlie: And then I'll be happy.

Lucy: **I can't do it!**

WHAT A DIFFERENCE ACCEPTANCE CAN MAKE

Sometimes it's hard to offer acceptance, but amazingly, sometimes that is all it would take to make one of our family members happy or to heal a broken or damaged relationship.

What happens when someone accepts us just the way we are? As we receive acceptance, we are freed to express whatever thoughts and feelings we are experiencing without fear of being rejected. Whenever we experience acceptance we realize that someone is listening to us and valuing us in a full and unconditional way.

Receiving the gift of acceptance brings us closer to health and wholeness; it moves us toward freedom and maturity.

IMAGINE!

Imagine a family where love doesn't have to be earned and where forgiveness is freely offered.

Within the life of a congregation, people can experience acceptance and share it with friends as well as newcomers.

Imagine a church where everyone is accepted and valued, regardless of whether our interpretations of the Bible or political issues are the same.

God is still working in each of our lives as we become the persons God intends us to be. Through the grace of God and the power of God's Holy Spirit working in our life together, let us continue to grow as a community of faith that reaches out within our church and beyond, offering the gift that can change lives: the gift of acceptance.



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