

“LET THE PARTY BEGIN”

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When I applied to be pastor of SPPC, I did so because I was entirely convinced that South Park was filled with good people and promise- people who were willing to love and be loved. I was also impressed with the spirit of your PNC members, and the fact that you were willing to engage in hands-on ministries- like our food site, and Drop-In Center, and our tutoring programs. These things are hard to find, and considering the string of Interims that you had, I was impressed that you had done such a faithful job of holding onto the core of this ministry. And then there was the sanctuary- our beautiful and sacred sanctuary- which simply inspires a person to worship and service. I walked upstairs to see those very unique windows and I walked around down stairs, taking in the power and the beauty of each of our 17 stained glass windows, from the Prodigal Son to our Lord’s Resurrection, and I knew that there was a depth here- a spiritual gravitas that I wanted to be part of. These are the reasons we packed up- and came to the river, and for the next 17 weeks I’d like to preach on the message in one of our stained glass windows- the first of which was given by Mrs. Elmore Gripp and Curtis in “loving memory” of Elmore Gripp. It’s a beautiful depiction of unmerited grace and the trouble most of us have accepting it.

Join me now... as we enter into our first stained glass window and get a sense of the context that surrounded it. Jesus is speaking to a crowd. He’s been speaking... about kingdom joy, about what is lost being found. And now he is about to shock his listeners with the radical nature of His Father’s love, and we are in the crowd. Look around and see who is with us. The Pharisees are here as you can see- men and women who are fanatical about religious behaviour- and the keeping score of it. Look and see that the scribes are also in the crowd- learned men, who are too smart to accept simple things. The Sadducees are here- the cultic fat cats who ran the temple. Jesus often criticized their self-righteousness and their hypocrisy, but they are here, as are the tax collectors and of course the sinners- men and women who are greedy, selfish, resentful, hypocritical, and who refuse to love their neighbors as themselves. With their burdened lives and troubled souls, sinners who knew themselves to be sinners were the very ones who heard Jesus best, and they are with us today. Maybe you’ve known one or two.

All of these people are here just as Jesus begins to tell them a parable. There was a father who had two sons- a diligent older son- as first borns can be- and an impulsive younger son- who was bored with life on the family farm. So, he asked dad for his inheritance in advance, which was just as nervy and as awkward then as it would be today. But for reasons of his own, the father gives the kid his share of the estate and the young man split for faraway places, where he did who knows what and ended up working for a gentile, slopping hogs, for next to nothing. For a 1st century Jew things could not have been worse. The youngest son had hit bottom (as they say) and even the pigs’ food looked good to him! Well, there’s something about a bottom that motivates some people- so the youngest son decided to throw himself on his father’s mercy (as we all must do). Anything had to be better than the world he had gotten himself into... so he set out for home. Meanwhile, his older brother is diligently at work- as he always had been- and his father is patiently waiting for his youngest son to come to his senses. Finally, the

prodigal sees home, and his father sees him, even though he's a long way off, and throwing appearances aside, he (the father) runs to meet his son. It's a touching and awkward scene because fathers didn't do those sorts of things in those days and because the son was the one who had been AWOL.

New beginnings are hard to come by, and they're never earned, which is why the youngest son was taken aback when his father accepted him without hesitation. No "I told you so's." No snide remarks. Just accepting love and even empowerment as his father gives him a robe (a sign of belonging), shoes (a sign of freedom), and access to his credit card once again (with the signet ring). It is a story of a father's forgiving love- much more than a story about a son's carousing because impulsive young men are a dime a dozen. But grace is not! Grace is rare- priceless, sacred- and upsetting. Yes, upsetting. Troubling. Grace makes us mad because people don't deserve it and we can never really accept that THAT's what grace is. Grace makes people mad- especially hard-working people. If you're still with us in the passage, look around and see that the Pharisees are mad. See that this startling picture of grace- depicted in our first window- is too much for them. Too forgiving. Too loving. But that's when the party began! We heard Jesus talk about a lost sheep and a lost coin, and it was okay (although people shouldn't lose things) –but now, Jesus is talking about a party... for a spoiled brat, who had squandered his father's money on who knows what. It was too for his listeners to take, but Jesus held his ground. What could be more joyful (he said) than a person being freed from the tyranny of their sin? If unmerited grace and unearned new beginnings are not cause for a party, then what ever is or will be? Tell me, He said, why shouldn't the father throw a party? And there was deadly silence because the people were not willing to give others the grace that they themselves would have died to receive.

Well, Jesus went on, the older brother was just like some of us. He'd always been reliable and diligent, and he was in the field working when his father decided to throw a party for his devil-may-care brother... and you know, he refused to come to the party- even though his father told him that He had more than enough love to go around. Jesus revealed His Father as one who is prone to throw a party when even one of us gets saved, and it was too much for the oldest son. Okay, he thought, let the brat come home and work his way back into favor. Let him come home to bread and water, not a fatted calf! Let him come home in sackcloth not a robe. Let him come back on his knees, in tears not joy, and certainly not kicking up his heels on a dance floor. The party was the last straw and the oldest son would not celebrate and Jesus left us with this question: what would we have done? My unwed daughter comes home with a new baby- will you come over and celebrate? My son is getting out of rehab this Friday- will you drop by and give him a hug? Johnny survived the accident barely. He was drunk and they thought he was a woman until they cut the dress off of him. We're having a cook-out for him tomorrow- will you be able to stop by? Are you, pray tell, more like the eldest son, or more like the father? If you have trouble with grace, thank God that the Father doesn't!