

Readings for this sermon Jer4;11,12,22-28, 1Tim1;12-17, Lk 15;1-10

The readings seem to indicate that humans have a hopeless track record of living anywhere near to the “kingdom way” of both Christ’s teaching and that of most of the Old Testament too. When you look at this you sometimes get the feeling of an exasperated God, torn between abandoning his people, or handing out ever more fierce punishments to them.

But the Gospels have Jesus teaching another picture of God.

“God,” says Jesus, “is like some one who has lost something, like a coin, or a sheep, or a son. It is the focus of his attention, just as it would be yours if you lost a child in a shopping mall, or your wallet on the subway, or your dog at a busy intersection. God will do anything to get a lost his child back. And when he does it becomes party time in heaven and all the angels get cake and beer, or an alcohol free drink of their choice!”

Notice! There is no hint of punishment, or repayment, or making required amends. All the school principal, county court judge, angry grandmother stuff that so often makes Christianity sound judgmental and excluding, all of that is missing from these key images Jesus uses.

There is a name for this attitude of God, revealed in the teaching of Jesus. It is called GRACE.

Grace is the open, unconditional love of God.

Grace is the abundant desire of God for you to succeed.

Grace is the willingness of God to redeem anyone, to buy them back, no matter how stupid, unlucky, lazy, or downright bad they may seem to you.

Grace is the welcome of God to anyone who arrives, returns, is carried home or just stumbles in by chance.

We humans have difficulty with Grace. We tend to arrange ourselves into groups of “Us” and “Them”. Whether by race, or creed, or income, or dress code. We like to focus on what makes us different. And we hate the idea that anything worth having can be just given away for free. Really, we just curve away from it. Grace is hard for us. Judgment is easier, but it is wrong.

So I have a story about receiving Grace myself.

Lucy and I went to the Evolve Festival in Nova Scotia. We were the oldest people there by decades. The music was electric, loud and powerful. The place was teeming with people less than 30 years old, all crazily dressed and consuming more interesting things than beer alone. I felt a bit out of it. I felt like an outsider. I felt slightly uncomfortable, like I did not quite belong, no matter how hard I pretended.

Then I noticed a couple sort of sidle up beside me. The guy said “Hi!” so I said “Hi!” back. “Do you like this music?” he said. “Yes, I do.” I said. “Why do you like it?” he asked, with a clearly intense interest, like I was a strange species he had chanced upon. So I explained what I liked. His curiosity about me was utterly non-judging, and quite open and honest. After a while he paused, dug in his pocket and pulled out a small card, which he put in my hand. It read;

YOU ARE F***ING AWESOME.

KEEP THAT SH*T UP

He and his partner gave me a huge smile and a hug and made their way of into the dancing crowd.

I felt massively, utterly accepted. As time went on we noticed people point at us, as strange and wonderful aliens, and we felt oddly honoured and welcomed. Someone said to Lucy, "Man! I have so much respect for you being here!"

I have a slide show of the new building at 700 Kennedy Rd.

The building will be Grace Church.

We will be the people of Grace.

The whole design of the building is about being open, welcoming, inviting, easy to get into, to move through, to be welcomed into and made to feel at home. That was the first and dominant guiding rule for the design. The second rule was that nothing would ever be nailed down, fixed in place or rigid. Things will always be open to change as we welcome new and changing people. We will change and be changed.

We keep wondering when we will get in. About the first week of November it looks like now.

We wonder about our seats, where the choir will go, and the children, and coffee hour.

All these wonderings about "Will we be *at home* there?" are important.

But this church is all about GRACE.

It is about where will a newcomer go, and how will a visitor feel accepted. It is about what 20 South Asian families joining will do to the nature of worship, and how we bend to welcome them. It is about youths from 2nd Base serving coffee on Wednesday mornings and playing strange and loud music, but knowing *they* are "home" and safe and accepted.

Grace church has a mission to hand out a message like I received at the festival. Because Jesus, in his own way, says to the lost and the lonely and the left-behind,

YOU ARE AWESOME.

KEEP THAT UP

And with a smile and a hug makes them know in their hearts and bones that they are friends,

brother and sister members of the Kingdom of Heaven,

marvelously celebrated by angels, just because they are here.

It is never thought "you don't belong here".

It is always said, "Man! I have so much respect for you being here!"

That is the Mission of Grace.

It is our Mission

It is Jesus' Mission.

It is God's Mission