

# “Lesson Five: Let Love and Grace Guide Your Life” +

*Lent IV*

*Joshua 5:9-12; II Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32  
(the fifth sermon of nine in the series, “Life Lessons from Luke”)*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens  
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>



A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 31, 2019, Lent IV, dedicated to the memories of Amber Evans, a 28 year old community activist whose death was by suicide and The Rev. Dr. Charles E. Booth, pastor and teacher for 41 years at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church and to honor Bishop Robert Brennan, 12<sup>th</sup> Bishop of the Diocese of Columbus, and always to the glory of God!

*“Lesson Five:*

*Let Love and Grace Guide Your Life”*

*Joshua 5:9-12; II Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (the fifth sermon of nine in the series, “Life Lessons from Luke”)*

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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In her book *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*; Alice Walker tells the story of the Bemba people who come mainly

from northeastern Zambia. You may have seen it or heard the story in various forms. It goes like this...

The Bemba are composed of 18 different ethnic groups, numbering around 400,000 today and share the Bemba language in common. Following a largely matriarchal structure and known mostly for their oral traditions and storytelling practices, the Bemba people believe that every human who comes into the world is good. Every person's deepest desire is for safety, love, peace and happiness. When someone from this group of people acts unjustly or irresponsibly, that person is brought into the village and required to stand alone and unrestrained in the center of all the people gathered around. All the other members of the Bemba people are called together and gather in a large circle around the one who has been accused of the wrongdoing.

Each person gathered around the accused begins to speak. As they speak, they recall all the good things that the accused person has done throughout the course of a lifetime. Many good deeds are mentioned in great detail. All of the accused's positive attributes, strengths, kindnesses and efforts on behalf of the common good are recited carefully by different members of the group.

When everyone has spoken on behalf of the accused one, all the members of the Bemba people break the circle and a joyous celebration takes place. The one who had committed an injustice or who had behaved badly is now welcomed back into the group and given a fresh start. Past deeds are now forgotten and forgiven as celebration and reconciliation intersect.

The Bemba people are stronger and more unified because of this ritual which focus on the positive aspects of the person instead of the negative. This loving and grace-filled response, instead of a punitive one, supports each person and the community in the face of difficult situations.

I know you may be thinking, “there certainly must be situations and actions which this practice can’t embrace. There must be crimes so heinous, that no circle of reconciliation can heal these actions.” My mind goes there, too. I get it.

But what if we embraced this model of reconciliation, forgiveness and ultimately, celebration for the lives of those within our community who had fallen apart and fallen away? What if we found a way to bring the ones who are broken themselves and break and hurt others into healed and healthy relationships with those whom they had violated and with one another?

We, like the Bemba people, are a people united around common values and common themes for love and grace in our Christian community. We are “the Christian people” if you will. We are not as far from the circle of reconciliation through love and grace as we think we are. All our scriptural readings today attest to the essence of reconciliation and celebration.

In Joshua, we hear that God has freed the Israelites from the reproach of Egypt. Their newfound freedom and their deepening relational experience of their God brings them to the point of celebrating Passover while they are encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho. In II Corinthians 5 celebrates the good news about reconciliation. According to the Apostle Paul, God is reconciled to the world through Christ. Paul calls all Christians to enter into the ministry of reconciliation especially since we, together with Paul, have been entrusted with the message of reconciliation. Paul calls the community at Corinth, and by extension, all Christians and ALL people, to be reconciled to God. He envisions a God who is full of compassion, who keeps no tally of transgressions, and who does not hold offenses against those who have done them.

Then in Luke 15, love and grace, reconciliation and celebration come together most powerfully in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus addresses this parable to a group of complaining religious leaders who take issue with Jesus' interaction with

sinners. In this story, we hear about the younger son of an estate owner making bad decisions about the inheritance given to him by his father. He sets off to a distant country, but because of poor choices, he becomes destitute. Meanwhile, his older brother remains at home and fares well because of the good choices he made with respect to his inheritance.

As the story progresses, we see the struggles of the younger son, his decision to return home, and his father's warm welcome that is much to the chagrin of his older brother. Significant is the point that when the younger son does return home, the father's warm embrace allows the son to be reconciled with his father.

This is a powerful and complex story. Every time I read it, pray over it and preach it, it touches me in new ways. The story doesn't change, but our lives change around it. 2 ½ years ago, I read it and shared it in a way that I can't shake loose from my memory or the eyes of my reading this story. **I read this story through the lens of the younger son struggling with a mental health condition.** I didn't see him as "bad" or "wayward" I saw him as one battling a brain disease.

So, I raise the question for you **again** – is it possible that the younger son has some sort of Brain disease? We can all admit that his behaviors are compulsive – right? A person doesn't

beg for, cajole and force the hand of a parent for half their value while they are still living, then get it, and go and blow it immediately without something being wrong in their mind? Right? That is NOT NORMAL BEHAVIOR. We can at least agree on that.

Let's look closer - One of the problems in dealing firsthand with a brain disease is that – for both the person with an illness and the people in the family around them - there is often a continued ramping-up of behaviors. The adult son who pushes his father to give up the farm has (in this interpretation) pushed his father throughout his lifetime about lots of things – including family rules, household chores, going to church (or synagogue), going to school, and of course - money. He pushes and pushes and pushes until his father gives in from a lifetime of pressure. Through it all, it isn't that he his “bad” (which his brother keeps saying). Rather, he is sick.

A friend of mine experienced her father going through the end stages of cancer and found that the disease changed his behaviors and it changed his brain chemistry. And chemo and radiation and the disease itself made him say things and do things that didn't fit the dad she had known throughout her lifetime. In time, she was able to forgive the behavior because of the disease's effects on her dad. **When cancer changes or intensifies a person's behaviors, we are able to forgive and**



**move on.** When brain disorders and diseases do the same to our loved ones, it is much harder to move on – even though the same love and grace extended to one disease needs to be extended to the other, too.

We focus on the behaviors (don't we?) – because we often don't have words or thorough medical analysis to name the actions and thus forgive them. Erratic behaviors related to mental illness haunt the circle of loved ones who wonder – could we have said something different? Done something different? Responded better? Reacting to things will make you crazy. You find yourself hiding things, saying things, lying about things (for the first time in your life), doing things you never imagined possible – even giving away half your farm to a child who has not demonstrated in any way that he is stable enough to handle the money he is giving him.

**I would like for us to see the younger son as sick and for once in our lives not simply see him as “bad.”** He may be suffering from bi-polar disease. He may be afflicted with psychosis or suffering from some form of schizophrenia. He may have multiple diagnoses. We don't know. It was the first century. Nobody had a diagnosis back then. None of these words were in existence. People like the younger son were called names like lazy, wasteful, wayward, evil, sinful, a shame on the family name. In fact, people like the younger son are

stigmatized and still called names today. Some of us use these names with our own family members or others around us. Some of us do it to people in our workplace and schools, too.

But when we look closely, we see a young man who is not well. He is wallowing with pigs in a pigsty, eating the food of pigs (from the perspective of a religious Jew – this is lower than low). Can you get any crazier than that? It is there in a pigsty the youngest son wakes up. The clouds part in his brain and “he comes to his senses.” For a moment, he sees his true condition. He has nothing. He has hit rock bottom. For a moment in time, he realizes how low he has fallen. There is the stinking, sinking mud of the pigsty he starts a conversation with himself. The young man is talking to himself. Has anyone ever noticed this before? Seeing himself as the world sees him – as bad – and not as one who is battling brain diseases, he puts together one sentence to say to his father: “I have sinned against heaven and before you, I am not worthy to be called your son.” He rehearses this all the way home. Like a mantra of madness, seeking to find home, he talks to himself and he heads home.

Like all loving parents who have walked through their children’s brain diseases, the father is waiting for his son. His daily prayer is that the boy is still alive. As bad as his behaviors may have become, as often as the father has had thoughts, he

had to suppress about his son which he hates himself for having, he waits. Every night he goes to the edge of his property and watches as the sun goes down to catch a glimpse of his son in the darkness at the edge of town. Every morning, he arises – as if he had been sleeping – to watch.

Every parent whose son or daughter has left home in distress or run away from home has the same sick and sinking feeling in their hearts. Is she alive? Is someone out there caring for her? Is she dead in a ditch? Is he in a homeless shelter? Or has he found happiness and a sense of sanity? Has he found a home – somewhere? Anywhere? Did some other woman or man look into his eyes or her eyes and see the hurt child that I see? And the wondering turns into a prayer – with the same depth of anguish and concern. And the prayers are lamenting prayers, painful prayers. And the prayers are all you have. A cry to God for help.

Finally, the son reaches what's left of the family farm. His father sees him first and runs to his side. The son's speech has been muttering under his breath the whole way home. But as the son begins to speak only half of what he wants to say gets out of his mouth before his father declares in a totally unrehearsed way to all those who can hear: *“Quick! Dress him with a robe, a ring for his finger and sandals. Get the fattened calf and kill it and we will have a celebration feast because my lost son*

*who was dead has come back to life! He was lost and is found!”*

Like the Bemba people, the father surrounds him with love, grace, mercy and celebration.

**Let the party begin!** Grace abounds! Love has spoken. **Not so fast.**

Remember, the father has two sons. The older son doesn't suffer from "Crazy in the brain." The older son has plenty to say. When the older son confronts his dad, the father listens to everything he screams. Unlike his younger brother who has rehearsed all his words there is nothing rehearsed in big brother's explosion (although he must have thought these words inside his head a thousand times). The dutiful son, the loyal son – or should we say the "healthy-minded" son – explodes. He lets it all hang out. He has been good. He has followed orders. He has been faithful. He has done everything right - as opposed to everything wrong.

And dad absorbs it all. He doesn't get angry. He doesn't lecture his son about honoring your father. He has lost his younger son to the afflictions of the brain and misbehaviors of waste and recklessness. Now he is watching his older son getting lost in anger. The father simply loves his oldest son in return. He says, *"son, you are always with me. Everything I have*

*is yours . . . but **your brother** was dead and is alive, he was lost and has been found.”*

Love and Grace abound for the father of these two sons. He finds a way to speak to each son. Reading the texts through the lens of brain diseases and family systems helps us see that when one out of five people in a family system is afflicted with a brain disease, the other five family members are affected. These may be our children, but they are also the siblings of our other children.

What if we circle the son, the daughter, the one who is broken and love him or her back into our community? What if we allow reconciliation and celebration to guide us to deeper and fuller union with the sacred, divine presence many of us call God? I invite you to join me in the circle of love and grace.

**Lesson #5 from Luke is simply this: Let Love and Grace Guide your life.**

*+ The Bemba people story is drawn from the reflections by Sr. Carol J. Dempsey, Dominican Sister of Caldwell, New Jersey, and professor of biblical studies at the University of Portland, Oregon found in the National Catholic Reporter, March 29, 2019.*

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