

**“Uber Grace”**  
**Luke 15:1-2, 11-32**  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**March 6, 2016**  
**4th Sunday in Lent**

It only took the Uber driver two questions to discover that he had just picked up 3 pastors in Atlanta last week. After snidely suggesting that we were probably raising millions of dollars for our own private jet, an allusion to Atlanta-based TV preacher Creflo Dollar, he said, “so since you’re a pastor, you think that unless I believe in Jesus I’m going to hell.” “Look man,” I told him, “I’m off the clock now, so how badly do you want to discuss this?” He head jerked out of the forward driving stare until his eyes met mine, sizing me up. “Off the clock?!!” Clearly I had agitated him. “My normal theology hours are 8am to 5pm,” I told him glancing at my watch. “And why do you care so much?”

He hedged so I pushed harder. “Do you think about God a lot? Because most of the people I know who ask these kinds of questions end up in seminary. Do you think God might be calling you into the ministry?”

“Naw, man. I don’t even go to church.”

“Well somebody in your family goes to church. Otherwise you wouldn’t have known to ask the question like that.”

“My Grandmother,” he admitted.

“I get it,” I said. “Your grandmother’s worried that since you don’t believe in Jesus, you’re going to hell. And you need a second opinion.”

“I don’t care that much,” he said, trying to play it cool.

“Just enough to ask a Presbyterian pastor he just picked up off the street,” I joked.

I couldn’t tell whether the look on his face was anger or just concern. But he pressed on with his question. Clearly he wanted an answer. He wanted to know.

I would really like to know what happens after the homecoming of this younger son. The cynical side of me already knows. A week goes by, the party ends and the wayward son goes back to his wayward ways. The older son returns to the field – somebody’s got to put food on the table – while the younger son sleeps in late, rises hung-over and hits the couch for some tv watching, before doing whatever he feels like doing. The late night parties return along with his problem drinking. He runs up daddy’s credit cards – again – on the booze, the women, the problems. Elder son gets to say “I told you so” while father cries parental tears of lost dreams.

I hate to bring the cynicism into this beautiful story of grace and forgiveness, but let’s be honest. We don’t love like this Father loves, because most of us have been around the block a few times.

There are some brothers we can’t welcome back home. The alcoholic brother whose disease will be enabled by another round of giving. The shiftless sister who won’t ever take responsibility for her future as long as someone else is meeting all her present needs.

There are some siblings we haven't figured out how to welcome back home. The ones who've strayed for so long there's not enough of a relationship to think about extending an olive branch. The ones who are out of touch, who seem fine on their own, who don't seem to want or need the wounds of the past or more importantly the relationships that gave rise to them.

And then there's the truth that some of us are the younger sibling. Some of us left homes we *cannot* return to. Some of us left homes we don't *want* to return to. Some of us inflicted wounds where forgiveness has not been extended, forgiveness that we may not even think should be extended. Some of us would like to go home but aren't sure how we would be received.

We know too much brokenness in relationships to believe that this kind of healing lasts. We know too much about other human beings to trust a "happy ever after story" like this one. We know too much to take this story of grace as a simple prescription for how we ought to be in the world. We know too much about human beings which is why we can hardly accept a God whose love is so forgiving.

The Uber driver wasn't ready to accept it which is probably why I was wary to say too much about God and hell. "I probably can't give you an answer that's going to satisfy your hunger tonight," I told him. "Plus, you've already got Creflo Dollar on TV. You don't need some jet-less Presbyterian pastor to weigh in on this." He took a corner aggressively suggesting that perhaps I should reconsider. "Alright, alright" I said, "You want to know if I think you have to believe in Jesus in order to stay out of hell?"

"Yeah," he said. "That's what I want to know."

"The truth is. . . I don't know," I said. "It's not my decision to make."

"You've got to be kidding me!" he shouted, slamming out his syllables on the steering wheel. "You're a pastor and you can't tell me if I have to believe in Jesus if I want to stay out of hell!"

I didn't have the words to explain to the driver that religious people venturing answers to that question is a big part of what ticks off Jesus to begin with. Religious people sorting God's children into acceptable and unacceptable categories really gets Jesus' goat.

Jesus tells this prodigal son story as a reaction to the religious leaders "grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" The religious leaders were worried that someone who claimed to be close to God had relationships with people who didn't deserve them. And so Jesus tells them stories to illustrate who God is which turns out to be more scandalous than most of us want.

The Father is ready to forgive this good-for-nothing son while he's still far off. The parent is filled with compassion, that word that comes from the inward parts<sup>1</sup> – deep in his soul. One commentator says the father running to meet his son was

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek word translated here as "compassion," is *splagchnizomai*, which comes from the word that means "the inward parts" – the guts. The Greeks thought that these inward parts represented the seat of the more violent passions such as anger and love. But the Hebrews referred to them as the seat of the tenderer affections such as kindness, benevolence, and compassion.

considered “extremely undignified.”<sup>2</sup> It was publicly embarrassing for a father to act like this.

God’s love is given where it isn’t deserved. God’s love chases after people who we know should be written off. God’s love wastes itself on people who clearly aren’t worth it. God’s grace is embarrassing, gratuitous, irrational, offensive to anyone who thinks that love must be earned. To anyone who thinks that redemption is a light whose switch we get to flip.

“No,” I told the Uber driver, “I can’t tell you that if you don’t believe in Jesus then you’re going to hell. It’s not my decision to make.”

“That’s not what Creflo says,” he told me.

“What do I know,” I said? “If I had a \$65 million jet do you think I’d be using Uber? I can only tell you this: It’s *because* I believe in Jesus that I think God’s love for you is so strong, hell itself probably *never* wins. God’s love for you is a lot stronger than any hell than I can imagine. It’s *because of Jesus* that I believe that.”

While I’m surprised to admit it, I think Paul tried to say a similar thing to the people in Corinth. God is reconciling the whole world to Godself. God is repairing the divisions, the alienation, the chasm between us. We know this because of Jesus. The whole Jesus project, if you can call it that - coming to live in our skin, coming share in our suffering, coming to end the cycle of violence and retribution which we see lived out in our wars, in our families, in our churches, in our presidential campaigns - the whole Jesus project is another attempt by God to teach us God’s tenacious love for all of creation. Reconciliation is God’s mission to humanity. God’s movement toward us to repair the breach. We know this because of Jesus. In Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the whole world to Godself.

You can see that in the way this father works so desperately to reconcile his children to each other. “For all these years I have been working like a slave for you,” the angry older son bellows at his soft-hearted father, “and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this *son of yours* came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!” (v. 30). The older son has already written off his younger sibling - he can’t even refer to him as his brother. “This son of yours” he calls him. But the father says to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because *this brother of yours* was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (v. 32). “*This brother of yours.*” God loves her children so much, she refuses to let us disown each other.

Here is where the church finds our vocation. God is working to repair the human family. To reconcile the world to Godself, as Paul puts it. God is putting the family back together. God is bringing back together children who have strayed far from home and siblings who have disowned them. God is bringing back together people in our city, people in our world so long divided that they don’t even realize they’re part of the same blessed family. God’s love and forgiveness is hard at work

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<sup>2</sup> Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2004, p. 24.

in the world putting the family back together and we are invited to join the feast no matter who we are, what we've done, how badly we've failed, how divided we are from ourselves or each other. God is putting the family back together and will sacrifice whatever God needs to sacrifice, will give whatever needs to be given, will suffer whatever needs to be suffered to make this happen.

We were approaching our destination so the Uber driver lobbed a final question my way. "So what if I lived a really bad life," he said, "did horrible things, then on my death bed, right before I took my last breath, I told God I believed? Would I get to go to heaven then?"

"I'm pretty sure God can decide whether or not somebody's sincere," I said. "It's not some game we can manipulate. It's about the very heart of God – *who God is*. And who God is offensive to our notions of what's fair. Bottom line – your future is not in your hands and neither is mine. And that's good news. Because I trust God way more than I trust some TV preacher who raises \$65 million for his own jet. And you should trust God way more than some off-the-clock Presbyterian pastor you picked up on a Tuesday night.

God's grace is embarrassingly naïve, this God who eats with sinners and welcomes them. This God who welcomes the prodigal home before he deserves it. This God who won't let a son forget his brother. This God who is reconciling the whole world to Godself one child at a time, one cross at a time, one relationship at a time. God's grace is extremely undignified, embarrassingly naïve, a fact the Uber driver could plainly see.