

## 4 Lent, Year C

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Joshua 5:9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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**“I believe in grace,  
and grace is always a scandal.”**

A few days ago I was told about  
a conversation someone else  
overheard at their job.

One person in the room said to another,  
“How can you be okay with *that* person?  
You know they’re a sinner, *right?*”

I don’t personally know the people  
who were doing the talking,  
but I do happen to know the person  
they were talking *about*.

It’s a good person,  
a kind person;  
someone who goes to church,  
loves the Lord,  
loves others;  
who’s trying their best  
to find their way in the world,  
just like all the rest of us.

I wondered what *I* would say  
if they had asked *me*,  
“How can you be okay with *that* person?  
You know they’re a sinner, *right?*”

I thought about all the  
smart aleck, spiteful stuff I could say.  
But anger and sarcasm  
are never the answer.

I thought about how I could defend that person:  
talk about how kind and selfless they are,  
how they’ve always been there for me,  
and how maybe some of the stuff  
some people get so hung up on

may not matter as much as we think it does.  
But they wouldn't be able to hear that.

And then I thought of all the  
spiritual questions I could ask, like,  
"Aren't you Christian?  
Where's your humility?  
Where's your love?  
Are you so blameless  
as to cast the first stone?"  
But questions like that  
never work with those who are so sure  
they already have all the answers.

And then I realized  
what I *would* say.

If I had been asked,  
"How can you be okay with *that* person?  
You know they're a sinner, *right?*"  
my response would be,  
**"I believe in grace,  
and grace is always a scandal."**

\* \* \*

To this day, I do not understand  
brothers and sisters in Christ  
who live their lives so hell-bent  
on keeping up with *other* people's sins.

Putting everybody in categories.  
Watching to see who slips up.  
Carrying all that righteous anger.  
Fighting to convince everyone else to feel the same.

It must be *exhausting*.

But more to the point,  
that way of life flies in the face  
of everything Christianity stands for.

I know when y'all come to church  
it can be easy to zone out  
during some of the readings,  
especially the second reading  
since it's always from these old letters

written to the early churches,  
filled with tons of religious words.

But y'all, today's reading  
from 2 Corinthians  
is pure gold.  
It is Christianity 101.  
It is the heart of  
who we are,  
what we believe,  
and why you come here every Sunday.

This part of 2 Corinthians  
is *the* reason we do not say,  
"How can you be okay with *that* person?  
You know they're a sinner, *right*?"

Listen again to what Paul says.

**"From now on, we regard no one  
from a human point of view."** <sup>1</sup>

No more keeping columns;  
no more tracking trespasses;  
no more counting other people's sins.

Why?

**Because "if anyone is in Christ,  
there is a new creation:  
everything old has passed away;  
see, everything has become new!"** <sup>2</sup>

Some people take that to mean,  
"Fine, you may be a Christian,  
but don't mess up or you'll be  
right back where you started!"

But y'all, that is not what it says.

It does *not* say,  
"There *might* be a new creation."

It does *not* say,  
"There *could* be a new creation."

It does *not* say,  
"If you work *hard* enough,

and never mess up,  
and do all the things  
polite society and uppity religious people  
all say you're supposed to do,  
then maybe—just maybe—  
you might have a shot at  
making yourself into  
a new creation.”

*NO!*

It says, “if anyone is in Christ,  
there *is* a new creation.”

Where you once were a sinner;  
God now sees a saint.

Where you once were a wanderer;  
God now sees a wonder.

Where you once were  
lonely, a loss, a liability,  
God now see the love of his life.

And the crazy part?  
You did not do this.  
God did.

As Paul says, “**All this is from God.**”<sup>3</sup>  
We did not earn it.  
We do not deserve it.  
It is a gift.  
It is grace.  
It is a scandal.

\* \* \*

This is what Jesus is after in today's gospel.

A bunch of people ask *him*,  
“How can you be okay with *those* people?  
You know they're sinners, *don't* you?”<sup>4</sup>

His answer is to tell them a story,  
probably the most famous of all his stories,  
the parable of the prodigal son.

I think when we read this story,  
we often spend too much time  
trying to find *ourselves* in it:  
“When have I been selfish like the first son?  
When have I held a grudge like the second?  
How can I be more forgiving like the father?”

All of that is good, and right, and fine,  
but at its core  
this is not a story about the nature of *us*;  
this is a story about the nature of *God*.

It is about grace,  
and because it is about grace,  
it is a scandal.

There’s a priest in Texas who says  
every time this story gets told in church,  
clergy should train their congregations  
to clutch their pearls and gasp for breath  
at several pivotal moments. <sup>5</sup>

The son says, “Hey Dad,  
you might as well be dead already.  
Give me my money.” <sup>6</sup>

*Gasp!* What a horrible kid!

The dad says, “Okay son,  
if that’s what you want.  
Let’s see how this goes.” <sup>7</sup>

*Gasp!* What a pushover of a father!

The son goes and spends it all in Las Vegas!

*Gasp!*

On gambling and prostitutes!

*Gasp!*

And ends up eating garbage  
out of the dumpster  
without a penny left,  
all his credit cards maxed,  
and the IRS hot on his tail!

*Gasp! Gasp! Gasp!*

But none of that  
is the *real* scandal.

No, the *real* scandal is that  
when he finally came home,  
*his father saw him,* <sup>8</sup>  
which means his father had been waiting  
up on the roof all those years  
hoping for the day his son would return.

The *real* scandal is that  
the father went *running* to meet him, <sup>9</sup>  
which means the father had to  
gather up his robe between his legs,  
something men never did back then  
because it was so undignified.

The *real* scandal is that  
when the son starts to try to explain,  
the father says, “Shh shhh shhh.  
You’re home now.  
You are *home* now!  
There is nothing to do but celebrate.” <sup>10</sup>

Y’all, that is grace,  
and grace is a scandal.

\* \* \*

So if that’s how God is—  
if God is so good,  
so forgiving,  
so compassionate,  
so accepting of us—  
then who are we not to  
be the same for others?

Which brings us to the last thing  
Paul says in 2 Corinthians.

He says now that God has reconciled us in Jesus,  
he is “**entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.**  
**So we are ambassadors for Christ.**” <sup>11</sup>

But that’s the thing about ambassadors.  
Ambassadors don’t get to make up  
their own message,

their own policies,  
their own point of view.

Ambassadors communicate  
only the message  
of their president,  
or their emperor,  
or their king.<sup>12</sup>

Our King has been exceedingly clear  
that *his* message  
is the message of reconciliation and grace.

Anyone who says otherwise  
is telling lies in the name of the King.

So the next time someone asks you,  
“How can you be okay with *that* person?  
You know they’re a sinner, *right?*”  
tell them, **“I believe in grace,  
and grace is always a scandal.”**

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:16a

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:18a

<sup>4</sup> Luke 15:2 *paraphrase*

<sup>5</sup> Zimmerman, Aaron. “Lent 4 (C): Beth Moore and Clutching Pearls.” *Same Old Song*, Mockingbird, 21 Mar. 2022. *iTunes* app.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 15:12

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Luke 15:20

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Luke 15:22-24

<sup>11</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19-20

<sup>12</sup> Zimmerman.