

Precious Grace and Our Prodigal Side  
Memorial service for James Elliott Todd  
Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
July 27, 2012  
Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: Luke 15:21-24

One of the best known and most often-cited of Jesus' parables is the story of the Prodigal son. I think that's because there is at least a little bit of that one wayward son in all of us.

You know the story. A man had two sons. One stayed home and dutifully worked for his father. The other asked for his share of the inheritance up front. He took out and blew threw it as fast as he could. When he had spent every last penny and was down to fighting the pigs for their dinner, well, then, he came to his senses.

He resolved to return home to the father he had left and confess his wrongdoing. He would ask for mercy and then he would ask for a job as a hired hand in the operation he had stood to inherit.

We identify with this story because we see ourselves in that wayward son. I cite this scripture today not to say that Jimmy Todd was a prodigal on the order of the wrong-headed son. The adjective "prodigal" actually refers to the son's extravagant wastefulness. James Elliott Todd was anything but wasteful with money. To the contrary, he could squeeze the life out of a dime with the best of them. He rarely came out on the short end of any financial transaction. No, you didn't want to negotiate with Jimmy Todd.

Jimmy also differed from the prodigal son in that he was a great family man. He sought to honor his father and mother, unlike the spendthrift son in Jesus' story. He was a provider for his family who taught them the ethic of hard work and the value of a dollar. He doted on his three daughters, was a lively playmate, a practical joker and one who could never really bring himself to punish them, even when they deserved it.

Carole tells the story of how Jimmy was supposed to give her a spanking when she was little for something she had done. He took her to another room, closed the door, grabbed a pillow, started whipping it and told her to scream out at the top of her lungs.

No, Jimmy Todd didn't cut and run on his family nor did he blow through his financial resources. Those are not the reasons that I thought of the story of the prodigal son as I reflected on the privilege of knowing this man.

But, truth be told, Jimmy was no choir boy. And that is what made his witness to God's grace so authentic. We would be here all weekend if we went around the room telling Jimmy Todd stories.

There were his teenage years when he tormented the Charlotte police with cat and mouse games, when the city limits weren't far from here.

There were his days as a young adult when he would sneak a case of beer into the back door of the manse in a small town where his friend, a Methodist pastor, couldn't get caught buying beer.

There was the time he and a friend accidentally started a fire at the gas tank farm and almost blew up a quarter of the county.

There was the time he got his Mercedes-Benz convertible up to 130 miles an hour on an interstate in Tennessee at 3 in the morning, got stopped and still talked his way out of a ticket. "Really officer," he said. "I wanted to see how fast she would go ... just this once, honest."

Oh, how we could go on and on and on.

Yes, Jimmy was a child of God. But he also pushed the limits sometimes. Just like we all do. What made Jimmy Todd so real was that he didn't hide it. He didn't pretend he was perfect. Like the son in Jesus' parable, he admitted his faults, especially as he reflected on his life in latter years.

He would tell you that his motives weren't always pure, as, in his teenage years, when he went to church twice on Sundays. Once here at Caldwell and a second time at another church up the street where he had his eye on Billy Graham's good-looking sister.

The parable of the prodigal son is actually unfortunately named. That's because its message is not so much about the one son's prodigal-ness, his fast and loose ways with his family's money, honor and reputation. No, this story is about God's grace, God's endless, depth-defying, ever-abundant mercy and forgiveness, whoever we are, however wrong our ways, whether a little or a lot. It's about how that one son had a

moment of blinding revelation, his recognition that the one who would take him in when he had hit rock bottom was his father.

In that moment, the wayward son took accountability for his sins, stood ready to confess them and be content with even a few scraps from his father's table. He had the capacity to look inside himself and change and grow.

So did Jimmy. A son of early members of this church and of a prominent Charlotte family, he was raised in traditional Presbyterian, southern ways, ways that reflected their times, ways that, in hindsight, weren't always so loving and gracious to all of God's children. But Jimmy refused to be bound by time and old ways of thinking. As his daughters said, he walked both sides of the street of life. On one side, was the life of limited perspectives and time-bound attitudes. On the other side were the rest of God's children, of all races, creeds and colors.

Late in life, Jimmy recalled how a friend pointed out how Jimmy talked the same way to anyone he met, rich or poor, black or white. His friend meant it as a criticism. Jimmy told me he considered it the highest compliment he ever received.

When he came to have his own family, they moved away from Elizabeth and from Caldwell. For about two decades, they worshipped at other churches.

Then Jimmy bought a house up the street and came back home to Caldwell. His mind and heart had never stopped changing, never stopped growing. He arrived back here just in time to serve the church in its most desperate days, when this part of the body of Christ had shriveled so badly that it was paying the light bill with money in the organ repair fund.

But Jimmy never stopped believing. Even as he watched hundreds of others leave over the years, he would not give up on this church. One day, the dean of a new seminary in town came to see if the empty buildings here might be used to house the seminary. He walked the campus with Jimmy and couldn't help take note of the tens – if not hundreds - of thousands of dollars in repairs that would be needed.

Seeking to do right by his institution, Dean Tom Currie asked Jimmy if the church would just donate the entire campus to the seminary. It was a reasonable question by a resourceful leader. But, despite the fact that the congregation was down to only a dozen or so members, that was the last thing Jimmy Todd had in mind.

“He didn’t say ‘hell no,’ ” Dean Currie recalled for me this week. “But it was something equally vivid ... and salty.”

At that point in his life, Jimmy had come to understand God’s grace even more deeply than ever. So together with Jackie Abernethy, Sue Aivaz, the Strickhousers, Elora Hefner, Sarah Porter, Elaine Hultman and the other senior saints left, Jimmy helped open the doors of this church and this campus to all-comers.

And like the son who came home in Jesus’ parable, the story ended in a party. For his final years here, Jimmy was an active part of one big celebration ... a celebration of God’s inclusive grace that brought the church back to life and led Jimmy to say, “I’ve seen more love in this church than I’ve seen in my whole life.”

That is Jimmy’s legacy and it is our responsibility to keep this joyous celebration of God’s grace and acceptance going and going strong.

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I’ve heard several light hearted theories about why Jimmy went to meet his Lord face to face this past Monday.

Some say he could not get over the fact that they had just closed the Wendy’s restaurant where he loved to meet his friends and debate the issues of the day.

Some say that he went only when he was absolutely positive that we were going to paint the old, peeling louvers in the bell tower that he had worried about so much.

Some say he went to heaven because it was the last place he could look for that perfect 1951 Buick Roadmaster. Or perhaps he just wanted to ride his Harley again down the streets paved with gold.

I have another theory. You see, Tuesday was the birthday of a man named John Newton, who wrote the famous hymn *Amazing Grace* in the 1700s. As a young man, Newton had lived fast and loose like the prodigal son. He had also engaged in the slave trade until he realized the error of his ways. He became an ordained minister and ardent abolitionist.

In his most famous hymn, he wrote these words:

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears reliev'd;

How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believ'd!

Thro' many dangers, toils, and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.

I like to think that John Newton and Jimmy Todd are comparing notes on their experience in knowing what Newton called God's precious grace, the very same grace that led Jimmy home and, when all of our days are done, stands to do the same for each of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.