

# Sermon Note: You're Invited!

## Fourth Sunday in Lent

### Introduction

Some stories are meant to inspire. Others are meant to disturb. This week's parable does both—just not in the way we might expect. As we continue our #JesusTrending series, we encounter one of Jesus' most familiar stories: a son insults his father, burns through his inheritance, and returns home dirty, desperate, and undeserving. But rather than a lecture or a consequence, he gets a party.

We often hear this as a heartwarming tale of forgiveness—but for listeners in Jesus' day, it would have landed as offensive. What kind of father acts like that? What kind of love welcomes someone home with no strings attached? This week, we'll wrestle with the scandal of grace—how it offends our sense of fairness, exposes our biases, and invites us into a love that goes far beyond what feels reasonable.

### Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBTcQDBF6jo>

In *Zootopia* (2016), young Nick Wilde tries to join a scout troop—only to be publicly rejected. The experience changes everything.

### Why This Video?

In *Zootopia* (2016), Nick Wilde tells the story of how, as a young fox, he tried to join the Junior Ranger Scouts—excluded not because of anything he had done, but simply because he was a fox. Though the world of *Zootopia* presents itself as a city where everyone gets along, there is an unspoken bias that paints predators as dangerous and untrustworthy—no matter their actions or intentions. Nick learns that no matter how good he tries to be, the system is rigged against him—and so he gives up trying.

This clip pushes us to examine who it is that we deem worthy of acceptance, how we treat those we label as “outsiders,” and what happens when grace or inclusion shows up in places we think it shouldn't. Sometimes the most offensive thing isn't someone else's failure—it's the possibility that they might still be welcomed anyway.

### Video Discussion Questions

1. What stands out to you about young Nick's excitement before the ceremony? How does that make the rejection that follows feel even more painful?
2. Why do you think the other scouts felt justified in humiliating Nick? What assumptions or fears might have shaped their behavior?
3. The world of *Zootopia* claims to be inclusive, yet this scene shows something different. How does that mirror situations in our own world?

4. Nick says he learned that if the world only sees him a certain way, there's no point in trying to be anything else. Have you ever felt like other people's assumptions confined you—or shaped who you believed you could be?
5. What emotions does this scene stir up for you—anger, sadness, empathy? Why do you think it hits so hard?
6. Who might be the “outsiders” in your own context—those who are unfairly labeled, excluded, or not given the benefit of the doubt?
7. What makes it so difficult to extend grace or belonging to someone who doesn't seem to “deserve” it?
8. When have you seen grace show up in a place where it wasn't expected—or even where it felt offensive?
9. What would it take for someone like Nick to believe he belongs again—and not just tolerate being included, but actually trust it?
10. If you were one of the scouts in that moment, what might you do differently?

### **Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 (CEB)**

<sup>1</sup>All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

<sup>3</sup>Jesus told them this parable:

<sup>11b</sup>“A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the inheritance.’ Then the father divided his estate between them. <sup>13</sup>Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

<sup>14</sup>“When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup>He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup>I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup>So he got up and went to his father.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>Then his son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup>But the father said to his servants, ‘Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! <sup>23</sup>Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting <sup>24</sup>because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup>“Now his older son was in the field. Coming in from the field, he approached the house and heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>The servant replied, ‘Your brother has arrived, and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he received his son back safe and sound.’

<sup>28</sup>Then the older son was furious and didn't want to enter in, but his father came out and begged him. <sup>29</sup>He answered his father, ‘Look, I've served you all these years, and I never disobeyed your instruction. Yet you've

never given me as much as a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours returned, after gobbling up your estate on prostitutes, you slaughtered the fattened calf for him.’ <sup>31</sup>Then his father said, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.’ <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.’”

## Scripture Study Questions

Before considering these questions, read Luke 15 (above) and Psalm 32 (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2032&version=CEB>).

1. Our UMC.org website defines repentance this way: “Admitting we are wrong and saying we’re sorry can be difficult, but it is integral to our faith journeys. The church word for this is repentance. In addition to saying we’re sorry, true repentance includes a renewed commitment to a better way. When we repent, we turn away from sin and toward God.” How is repentance (verse 5) life-changing for the psalmist (verses 7-8)?
2. Father Greg Boyle, author of *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* comments on the parable of the prodigal son: “The father did not see ‘sin’; he saw ‘son.’ Once you see the kind of God we have, there can be no fear. Love drives out all fear.” How does the father’s response to the younger son and the elder son help us see deeper into God’s grace in our lives?
3. How does the father’s “prodigal grace” offend the older brother in particular? Can God’s prodigal grace sometimes be offensive to the “older brother” in us? Can you think of an instance that comes to mind?
4. Henri J.M. Nouwen offers a beautiful exploration of this parable in his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. About the older brother, he writes: “Resentment and gratitude cannot coexist, since resentment blocks the perception and experience of life as a gift. My resentment tells me that I don’t receive what I deserve. It always manifests itself in envy.” How do resentment and envy sometimes play out in family dynamics today? Is there a way toward reconciliation? What is it in your experience?
5. What would it look like to practice a “prodigal grace” at work, at home, or at school this coming week?

## Additional (Optional) Questions

Like the previous section of questions, please be sure to read Psalm 32. In addition, listen to “Rainbow” by Kacey Musgraves (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OFv566mj7s>).

1. What does Psalm 32 say about confession and forgiveness? Do you think we must admit a wrong before we can experience true forgiveness? Think about that dynamic with people first, then God. What do you think our church says about that?
2. Is “Rainbow” by Kacey Musgraves primarily about hope? Or something else? Is “a promise of hope” the same thing as hope itself?
3. Psalm 32:5 says, “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.” What parts of Jesus’ life in the Easter story have to do with sin, confession, and forgiveness?
4. How does our church talk about sin or understand the idea of sin? Do you have questions about sin as a concept? (Click here <https://www.umc.org/en/content/united-methodist-beliefs-sin> to watch a brief video on one way to understand the concept of sin in the United Methodist Church.)

5. The song "Rainbow" speaks about carrying burdens, even when a rainbow is over your head. How do you think the promise of hope (and, in the Easter season, a promise of new life/resurrection) affects how we each carry our burdens?
6. Have you ever carried a burden of guilt or stress for too long before finally addressing it? How did you feel before and after? Does Psalm 32 or "Rainbow" talk about relief in a way that feels better to you?
7. Both the psalm and the song emphasize hope after struggle. How do these messages connect to the journey of Jesus' death and resurrection?
8. Some people feel they have to "fix themselves" before coming to God, while others believe God welcomes us as we are. What do you think? How do Psalm 32 and "Rainbow" support your view?
9. "Rainbow" reminds listeners that they are already loved and seen, even when they don't feel it. How does this message compare to the idea of God's grace in Psalm 32?

### **Weekly Action**

This week, notice your reactions when someone else receives something good—especially if you feel like they didn't "deserve" it. Is there someone in your life whom you've mentally written off, held a grudge against, or quietly excluded? Write their name on a small piece of paper. Sit with it in prayer—not to fix the relationship or excuse the hurt, but simply to ask God: "What does grace look like here?" You may be surprised by what rises to the surface.

### **Prayer**

O God, you are a hiding place for us; you protect us from trouble; you surround us with songs of gladness; you watch over us. Help us to live into that assurance whatever we face this coming week. Amen.