

LOVING WITHOUT LIMITS

Grace

Today we begin a new series called Loving without Limits. We have a Vision Statement here at CBC which says: By 2025 CBC will Love without Limit.

So, how are we doing? How are you doing?

To help us move towards our Vision, we have a set of values that we say we will live out. We say we are a GOSPEL people.

G is for Grace – we will be motivated by God’s free gift of love in all that we do.

O is for One Another – we will be real as we care for one another and work together.

S is for Servant Hearts – we will serve those in the local community and beyond with integrity and love.

P is for People Matter – we will share the good news of Jesus with anyone who does not know him.

E is for Equipped – we will identify, develop and use our God given gifts.

L is for Lifestyle – we will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions.

We believe that if we live these values, we will begin to walk towards the Vision.

So, how are we doing? How are you doing?

In this series, we’re going to think again about our values, and today we begin by thinking about our value of grace: we will be motivated by God’s free gift of love in all we do.

Today there are two stories.

Once there were five sons who lived in a mountain castle with their father. The eldest was an obedient son, but his four younger brothers were rebellious. Their father had warned them of the river, but they had not listened. He had begged them to stay clear of the bank lest they be swept downstream, but the river’s lure was too strong.

Each day the four rebellious brothers ventured closer and closer until one son dared to reach in and feel the waters. "Hold my hand so I won't fall in," he said, and his brothers did. But when he touched the water, the current yanked him and the other three into the rapids and rolled them down the river.

Over the rocks they bounced, through the channels they roared, on the swells they rode. Their cries for help were lost in the rage of the river. Though they fought to gain their balance, they were powerless against the strength of the current. After hours of struggle, they surrendered to the pull of the river. The waters finally dumped them on the bank in a strange land, in a distant country, in a barren place.

Savage people dwelt in the land. It was not safe like their home. Cold winds chilled the land. It was not warm like their home. Rugged mountains marked the land. It was not inviting like their home. Though they did not know where they were, of one fact they were sure: they were not intended for this place. For a long time, the four young sons lay on the bank, stunned at their fall and not knowing where to turn. After some time, they gathered their courage and re-entered the waters, hoping to walk upstream. But the current was too strong. They attempted to walk along the river's edge, but the terrain was too steep. They considered climbing the mountains, but the peaks were too high. Besides, they didn't know the way.

Finally, they built a fire and sat down. "We shouldn't have disobeyed our father." They admitted. "We are a long way from home."

With the passage of time, the sons learned to survive in the strange land. They found nuts for food and killed animals for skins. They determined not to forget their homeland nor abandon hopes of returning. Each day they set about the task of finding food and building shelter. Each evening they built a fire and told stories of their father and older brother. All four sons longed to see them again.

Then, one night, one brother failed to come to the fire. The others found him the next morning in the valley with the savages. He was building a hut of grass and mud. "I've grown tired of our talks," he told them. "What good does it do to remember? Besides, this land isn't so bad. I will build a great house and settle here."

"But, it isn't home," they objected.

"No, but it is if you don't think of the real one."

"But, what of father?"

"What of him? He isn't here. He isn't near. Am I to spend forever awaiting his arrival? I'm making new friends; I'm learning new ways. If he comes, he comes, but I'm not holding my breath."

And so the other three left their hut-building brother and walked away. They continued to meet around the fire, speaking of home and dreaming of their return.

Some days later a second brother failed to appear at the campfire. The next morning his siblings found him on a hillside staring at the hut of his brother.

"How disgusting," he told them as they approached. "Our brother is an utter failure. An insult to our family name. Can you imagine a more despicable deed? Building a hut and forgetting our father?"

"What he is doing is wrong," agreed the youngest, "but what we did was wrong as well. We disobeyed. We touched the river. We ignored our father's warnings."

"Well, we may have made a mistake or two, but compared to the sleaze in the hut, we are saints. Father will dismiss our sin and punish him."

"Come," urged his two brothers, "return to the fire with us."

"No, I think I'll keep an eye on our brother. Someone needs to keep a record of his wrongs to show father."

And so the two returned, leaving one brother building and the other judging.

The remaining two sons stayed near the fire, encouraging each other and speaking of home. Then one morning the youngest son awoke to find he was alone. He searched for his brother and found him near the river, stacking rocks.

"It's no use," the rock-stacking brother explained as he worked. "Father won't come for me. I must go to him. I offended him. I insulted him. I failed him. There is only one option. I will build a path back up the river and walk into our father's presence. Rock upon rock I will stack until I have enough rocks to travel upstream to the castle. When he sees how hard I have worked and how diligent I have been, he will have no choice but to open the door and let me into his house."

The last brother did not know what to say. He returned to sit by the fire, alone. One morning he heard a familiar voice behind him. "Father has sent me to bring you home."

The youngest lifted his eyes to see the face of his oldest brother. "You have come for us!" he shouted. For a long time, the two embraced.

"And your brothers?" the eldest finally asked.

"One has made a home here. Another is watching him. The third is building a path up the river."

And so Firstborn set out to find his siblings. He went first to the thatched hut in the valley.

"Go away, stranger!" screamed the brother through the window. "You are not welcome here!"

"I have come to take you home."

"You have not. You have come to take my mansion."

"This is no mansion." Firstborn countered. "This is a hut."

"It is a mansion!" The finest in the lowlands. I built it with my own hands. Now, go away. You cannot have my mansion."

"Don't you remember the house of your father?"

"I have no father."

"You were born in a castle in a distant land where the air is warm and the fruit is plentiful. You disobeyed your father and ended up in this strange land. I have come to take you home."

The brother peered through the window at Firstborn as if recognizing a face he'd remembered from a dream. But the pause was brief, for suddenly the savages in the house filled the window as well. "Go away, intruder!" they demanded. "This is not your home."

"You are right," responded the firstborn son, "but neither is it his."

The eyes of the two brothers met again. Once more the hut-building brother felt a tug at his heart, but the savages had won his trust. "He just wants your mansion," they cried. "send him away!"

And so he did.

Firstborn sought the next brother. He didn't have to walk far. On the hillside near the hut, within eyesight of the savages, sat the fault-finding son. When he saw Firstborn, he shouted, "How good that you are here to behold the sin of our brother! Are you aware that he never speaks of home? I knew you would come. I have kept careful account of his deeds. Punish him! I will applaud your anger. He deserves it! Deal with the sins of our brother."

Firstborn spoke softly, "We need to deal with your sins first."

"My sins?"

"Yes, you disobeyed father."

The son smirked and slapped at the air. "My sins are nothing. There is the sinner," he claimed, pointing to the hut. "Let me tell you of the savages who stay there."

"I'd rather you tell me about yourself."

"Don't worry about me. Let me show you who needs help" he said, running toward the hut. "Come, we'll peek in the windows. He never sees me. Let's go together." The son was at the hut before he noticed that Firstborn hadn't followed him.

Next, the eldest son walked to the river. There he found the last brother, knee-deep in the water, stacking rocks.

"Father has sent me to take you home."

The brother never looked up. "I can't talk now. I must work."

"Father knows you have fallen. But he will forgive you.... "

"He may," the brother interrupted, struggling to keep his balance against the current, "but I have to get to the castle first. I must build a pathway up the river. First, I will show him that I am worthy. Then I will ask for his mercy."

"He has already given his mercy. I will carry you up the river. You will never be able to build a pathway. The river is too long. The task is too great for your hands. Father sent me to carry you home. I am stronger."

For the first time the rock-stacking brother looked up. "How dare you speak with such irreverence! My father will not simply forgive. I have sinned. I have

sinned greatly! He told us to avoid the river, and we disobeyed. I am a great sinner. I need much work."

"No, my brother, you don't need much work. You need much grace. The distance between you and our father's house is too great. You haven't enough strength nor the stones to carry you home."

"Are you saying I can't do it? Are you saying I'm not strong enough? Look at my work. Look at my rocks. Already I can walk five steps!"

"But you have five million to go!"

The younger brother looked at Firstborn with anger. "I know who you are. You are the voice of evil. You are trying to seduce me from my holy work. Get behind me, you serpent!" He hurled at Firstborn the rock he was about to place in the river.

"Heretic!" screamed the path-builder. "Leave this land. You can't stop me! I will build this walkway and stand before my father, and he will have to forgive me. I will win his favour. I will earn his mercy."

Firstborn shook his head. "Favour won is no favour. Mercy earned is no mercy. I implore you, let me carry you up the river."

The response was another rock. So, Firstborn turned and left.

The youngest brother was waiting near the fire when Firstborn returned.

"The others didn't come?"

"No. One chose to indulge, the other to judge, and the third to work. None of them chose our father."

"So, they will remain here?"

The eldest brother nodded slowly. "For now."

"And we will return to father?" asked the brother.

"Yes."

"Will he forgive me?"

"Would he have sent me if he wouldn't?"

And so the younger brother climbed on the back of the Firstborn and began the journey home.¹

Which son are you most like?

Here's the hard truth;

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3 v 23-24)

We're all away from home. And whatever we do we can't get ourselves back. It is the gift of God's grace in Jesus that carried us home.

How are you doing?

That was what last week's talk was all about, and the week before. God longs for us to come home. We can try all sorts of things, and live all sorts of ways. But, in truth, it is only God's free gift of grace that carries us home. Come back – its better that way.

And, precisely because that's true for us, that God loves us anyway and has come to us in Jesus to carry us home, that we extend that grace to others.

3 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. **2** Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. **3** When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. **4** Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” **5** So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. (Acts 3 v 1-5)

Peter and John were doing what they'd always done they were going to the temple to pray. They were good Jews and their custom, their habit, was to pray three times a day: 9 am, 12 noon, and 3 pm. They were going to pray. Peter and John were in the habit of prayer.

How about you friends?

¹ Lucado, M., *In the Grip of Grace*, Thomas Nelson 2021 ed. p 1-6

On their way to prayer, when a beggar asks for money, Peter and John stopped, and that is significant. You may say – well they stopped because the beggar asked for money. That’s true – but he was almost certainly not expecting them to stop. As a beggar in that society he knew he was ceremonially unclean. Because he was ceremonially unclean, he was not allowed to enter the temple. Actually, he was sitting as close as he could get to the temple – outside the gates, outside the temple courts.

He’d chosen a very strategic place to sit too – and he knew it! People would be coming and going all the time, and he knew that many people would give him money for one simple reason: it was religiously good to do so. The giving of alms was an important part of the Jewish faith.

But people passing the unclean beggar wouldn’t stop – he was unclean! So that they didn’t become unclean, they would throw their money and walk on! But Peter and John stopped. They were motivated by grace.

Perhaps it is a reflection of the world we live in today. Here is a broken man, a crippled man. Could we say that much of our world is crippled and broken? Could we say that many people in the world are, in one way or another, crippled and broken? Could we say that many people live without hope who see no future for themselves? Could we say that many people have to go through life having to beg in one way or another? Could we say many people are simply desperate to keep going from one day to the next never having confidence, purpose or joy? Maybe some of them are here today?

Peter and John stopped when they could have walked by. They were motivated by grace. They would be different because they had met God’s love in Jesus, and wanted to extend that love to others. Perhaps the challenge to us is to stop. Perhaps the challenge to us to stop so we can extend God’s grace to others.

How are you doing?

It’s interesting that Peter and John were going to the temple. We know they were going to pray, but maybe too, they were going because they knew that’s where people would be. Perhaps a challenge for us is something like this: how much do we put ourselves in places where we can extend God’s grace to others?

Peter and John, it seems, were intentional about this. Maybe we need to be intentional too. And maybe there are many different ways we can extend God's grace to others, if we are intentional about it. Maybe we can give, pray, serve, help, volunteer, support, encourage, sit with, talk to, care for.....

So, how are you doing?

The beggar is expecting Peter and John to give him money. That's what he wants and that's what he thinks he needs. Here's a challenging question: how much should/does the church give people what they think they need? Perhaps the temptation is to give money and walk on – as Peter and John were expected to do. And, maybe that's relatively easy and safe to do. And Peter and John would have done the right thing.

“I command you to be open handed towards those of your people who are poor and needy in your land.” (Duet. 15 v 11)

Peter's response is shocking.

⁶ Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” ⁷ Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. ⁸ He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. (Acts 3 v 6-8)

This crippled beggar got far more than he ever expected. He asked for money, but he got a new life. He was literally picked up and taken out of his broken world, a world of limitation in which he had lived for so long. And what had Peter and John given him? New life that comes through the truth about Jesus!

At one level Peter and John had absolutely nothing to give this man. As they said, they had no money! They did not have what this man wanted. They could not give this man what he thought he needed. But they had something far better, far more valuable, something of much greater worth. They had the truth about Jesus. And they were motivated by God's free gift of love – so they stopped!

Our Vision Statement says: By 2025 CBC will Love without Limit.

Friends, it seems to me that Peter and John, when asked by a beggar for money, had nowhere else to go than to the truth about Jesus. The Firstborn

son knew the truth about the Father and carried his youngest brother all the way home.

If we have nowhere to go but the truth about Jesus, that seems to me a great place to be. We will be motivated by God's free gift of love in all we do?

How about you friends?

How about us?

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