

Lent 4C (2016)
 Joshua 5:9-12
 Psalm 32
 2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

We live in an “I told you so” world. We expect that life will be more or less fair, and that people will get what’s coming to them, good or bad. But God is an “I love you no matter what” God. This is good news when we long for a full measure of grace. But, it’s also good news when we prefer judgment over mercy – when we resist grace – and God invites us to the celebration anyway.

When we put Alex to bed every night, I tell her, “I love you no matter what.” It’s easy to say it, especially when she’s cute and cuddly and quiet. It’s a lot harder to mean it, especially when she’s sleepy and stubborn and screaming. And, I say “I love you no matter what” over and over precisely because I know it’s a difficult promise. I can only imagine the ways that Alex might test our love over the years. I can only imagine the complexity of parenthood, the many possible causes of stress and anger and heartbreak. So, I say “I love you no matter what” as much for myself as for her. It’s a sort of mantra, a sort of prayer for patience and grace as I brace for impact.

And, I’ll need to keep teaching myself to say it because unfailing love is so hard to come by. “I love you no matter what” is rare because we live in an “I told you so” world. We expect that life will be more or less fair, and that people will get what’s coming to them, good or bad. We are quick to hold others accountable to standards that we set, and quick to point out their failures. We celebrate when good behavior is rewarded, and gloat when bad

behavior is punished. And, we're dying to say, "I told you so." (Even if we don't say it, we think it.)

"I told you so" is seductive because it helps us preserve the illusion of control. We convince ourselves that as long as we're willing to conform to the proper way of doing things, then we ought to see a return on investment. If, however, we step out of line, then there's no excuse when things go south. So, "I told you so" gratifies our desire to make sense out of what often seems like a chaotic existence.

This is why it's so painful when our children deviate from the plan. They don't behave the way we expect. They run with the wrong crowd. They drop out of school. They get into trouble. They refuse to heed our guidance. They marry the wrong person. They forsake our traditions. Sometimes, our children's choices lead to undesirable outcomes. And sometimes, they find their way back home, at which point we have a choice between "I told you so" and "I love you no matter what."

I suspect that more than a few of us would prefer that the story of the Prodigal Son ended differently. Imagine that the father grudgingly received his younger son back into the household, and, instead of rejoicing at his return, simply tolerated his presence. Imagine that the father celebrated instead his elder son's years of faithful service. The elder son certainly ought to be recognized for his hard work and fidelity. It's only fitting that he receive a

robe and a ring and a lavish party, while his younger brother is left to consider the consequences of his actions. That's the way the story should end in an "I told you so" world. After all, what kind of value system does the father uphold by rewarding the disrespect and betrayal of his younger son? What kind of virtue does he teach?¹

The extravagance of the father's grace, the abandon with which he embraces his wayward son is meant to surprise us, even offend us. Making a fool of himself in front of his more dignified neighbors, the father rushes out to meet his son while he is still far off and wraps him in his arms. He interrupts his son's well-rehearsed speech, calling for the finest clothes and the most abundant feast. In spite of his son's defiance, the father longs for his return and immediately restores his dignity and place in the household. Instead of "I told you so," he chooses to say "I love you no matter what."

We may live in an "I told you so" world, but God is an "I love you no matter what" God. It is God's nature to seek the lost and celebrate our homecoming, our reconciliation. There is no defiance, no rejection, no sin that can separate us from the love of God,² and we are forever welcome in God's presence and in the presence of the rest of God's broken, beloved children.

¹ See comment quoting Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/02/lent-4-c-the-prodigal-god/>.

² See Romans 8:38-39.

This is good news when we long for a full measure of grace, and I imagine some of us are breathing a sigh of relief as we identify with the younger son this morning. But what about those of us who identify with the elder son? What about those of us who resent the father's generosity toward the prodigal son, convinced that we are more deserving of grace than others? The good news is that **God also rushes out to meet us in our self-righteousness, and, faced with our defiance, extends to us the same promise of grace: "Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."** The good news is that when we prefer judgment over mercy – when we resist grace – **God invites us to the celebration anyway.**

The question remains: Will we go in to the party or not? Will we stubbornly hold to our "I told you so" tendencies and miss out on the wealth of God's grace? Or, will we be transformed by God's "I love you no matter what" and learn to joyfully share abundant life with others, even those we deem less worthy of it?