

God's Story of Extravagant Love
Genesis 29: 15-28, Romans 8: 26-39, Matthew 13: 31ff
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Eastminster Presbyterian Church

Once upon a time, in a Nigerian village, a small boy—10 years old—was sent out on an errand for his mother. He did not return. The country was in the middle of a civil war wrapped around issues of economy, culture, color, religion, and political power. Do you remember the Proverbs passage that says, “Train a child in the way he or she should go?” Unfortunately, there are times when the ones doing the training have no concept of teaching about God’s love, and the earlier the training can start the better, so at age ten, this boy was kidnapped and taught the ways of war. Forced to fight! Sometimes it was to please those in command, sometimes to earn a meal, at times simply to stay alive. The fighting became part of who this growing-older child was, brainwashed to believe that killing was part of daily living. As the boy grew older killing no longer affected him. He was trained to make the most of destroying bodies and buildings by using explosives to tear apart flesh and tear down foundations. Years had past and his family still did not know if he would ever return home. They did not know if he was dead or alive.

In this two-year plus war, one million civilians died from famine and fighting. The war became notorious for the starvation and genocide of innocent people, the poor caught in the middle of a power struggle.

One day the ten-year old, now a teen found, without warning, a grenade in his hands and in a split-second flesh was torn from that hand, parts of his body burned and bleeding. Two fellow soldiers, one on each side, were killed by the force of the explosion. He was spared.

In the heat of the battle, life and limb saving procedures were a luxury, not the norm. Seeing his hand, the young man could envision the result and he begged that his hand not be cut off. Because of tribal connections, and as the boy would say in adulthood-the grace of God- the hand was left intact through a series of skin grafts that left the hand scarred, but not deformed. So damaged was the hand that the young man’s body rejected its own skin grafts and so the skin that formed the new hand came from unfamiliar skin, the skin of others whose bodies had recently died.

The ten-year old boy turned teen eventually made his way home, a different young man, his innocence shattered by the realities of humans “not” loving as our Lord loves. The young man quickly discovered what many know, it is sometimes hard to go home. When you have lived in, and helped create, ugly in the world somehow home just is not the same, and you know you must move on. By the grace of God and the hands, feet, voices, and hearts of many, he found himself in American, a young adult. Through his own words, he shares that he is living proof of the ultimate love story that promises no matter how far we try to separate ourselves from God, God, through the sacrificial love of his own son, will never separate self from us. This man’s past will always be with him, but greater than his past is God’s unconditional love that gives us second and third and countless chances to live fully and freely in the grace of God.

That boy, turned teen, now a grown man is Princeton Abraaho, pastor at Midlothian Presbyterian Church. Princeton's story is not a once-upon-a time-tale; it is very real, and his words to all he meets: God will never let go of us!

Here is the rest of his story as a loved and forgiven child of God. He was called by our Lord into ministry to share the good news that no matter what we have said or done, even with the human consequences, there is nothing in life or in death that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. His journey is a living, breathing testimony to this unchangeable truth! His witness is a reminder that when we find ourselves at our weakest points, feeling so broken and shattered and distant from God that we do not even know how to talk to God, do not how to ask for forgiveness, are afraid to ask for a restored relationship, the apostle Paul says the Holy Spirit gets it, gets us! The Spirit understands that even when we cannot find the words to pray, when all we can do is sigh deeply, our forgiving God hears and knows what rests in our hearts, and knows that we ultimately want to live as the good people we were created to be. Why? Because as Princeton preaches, from the beginning of time, God's love has abided in, lived in our hearts, or in the words of one Biblical translation, God's love has pitched a tent in our hearts, taken up residence never to be moved.

God's response to Princeton's sighs and groans and pleadings instilled in him the absolute belief that even out of the horrors of his past, God can, and will and is working to, make all things good, according to his plan and purpose and in God's time, not ours.

Listen to the truth of this beautiful and comforting passage from Romans 8: 31-139. *What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? God who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will God not also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Just in case we need to be reminded yet again of this, remember Jacob's story, the brother who schemes against brother for the coveted birthright. The twin who finds himself wrestling with God. The one who finds himself on the run without a penny in his pocket. Jacob who finds himself in the company of Laban and his daughters. He works for food and shelter, works to marry the one who has captured his heart, Rachel. But the trickster is tricked, and only after more years of labor does, he finally marries the love of his life. It is a beautiful love story, but not the ultimate one. Like you and I, Jacob is a member of a funny, troubled, chosen and blessed human family. A family where there is conflict and deception; a family where the hand of God is moving amongst us in the ultimate love story--a love that is never separated from us.

At age ten, Princeton's life was not what he or his family expected it to be. But, amid all the pain and suffering and different paths God's love has worked good in his life. But, then again, God's kingdom seems to be inherently not what we expect either. How many parables have we heard, like this one today, metaphors in which Jesus says, in effect, the kingdom of God is not what you expect, it is like this rather than like that. Imagine the effect of Jesus saying to his followers, you are part of the great reign of God which is just like a small mustard seed that is planted in the soil, germinates and grows so much that it becomes a foot high shrub where birds find a place to nest and rest. But from something so small, to those birds, God gives such comfort. Jesus reminds us that God does not look at things the way we look at them. We measure greatness with size, numbers, and with volume. God measures greatness in terms of faithfulness. Just perhaps Jesus tells us this story of the little mustard seed growing into the little shrub to try to get us NOT to look at ourselves or our church in the same way. By God's grace, that unconditional story of love, perhaps we will be impressed with what impresses Jesus!

Mother Teresa says this: be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies, the strength of God that is greater than any of our weaknesses. I end as we began:

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the extravagant love of God has called us together. For long before we were even aware of it, God knew us. God had already chosen us to be part of His family—children of God! And having chosen us, God called us; and having called us, God justified us; and having justified us, God gave us his glory! So extravagant is God's love in Jesus Christ, the ultimate love story, that nothing will ever be able to separate us from it!