



March 31, 2019 - Ongoing Grace

Given by Rev. Mattei

[Luke 15:1-13](#)

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the best-known stories of the Bible, so we may decide that we do not have to pay much attention—we already know the plot and its point. We tend to treat the story as one of Aesop's fables with an intended moral teaching at the end. Its familiarity may easily prevent us to hear it anew and let it speak to us the truth we need to hear in the present moment. With familiarity comes distraction: we go on auto-pilot and don't really hear the grace beneath the message. We fail to pay attention to what prompts the story in the first place: disgruntled Pharisees and scribes are annoyed because the scum of society, the people they loathe most (tax collectors and sinners) come to listen to Jesus, and what's worse is Jesus receives them! Jesus, then, addresses both Pharisees and scribes in the first place and not so much those whom they consider sinners, although there is abundant grace for all. This begs the question: who is really lost here?

We are so familiar with the story that we miss the point we are dealing with a dysfunctional family. We have not only a young son who claims his inheritance unashamedly before his father's death, squanders his wealth in a much careless and liberal way and returns back home not out of repentance but out of desperation. We have also an older son who has been super cautious and conservative in his approach to life, obeying rules and respecting social order. But in addition to that, we also have a father accepts the boundary-breaking request of his younger son without even blinking. One wonders about that family dynamics if the younger son wanted so badly to get out of the house and related to his father as if he were dead, the older son was not open to enjoy his brother's return home and refused to party with the rest of the family, and the

father who so easily gave in to his younger son's demand and gave up when his older son refused to party. And what about the great absentee, the mother? Where is she in the story? Was she so fed up with the three of them that she just disappeared?

Family life can be hard and requires work. George Burns is said to have commented that "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city." Perhaps that is why the young man tried to leave his family behind.

We must acknowledge that the Pharisees and scribes were deeply religious people. They were very concerned with obeying God and all the religious laws of Israel. From their perspective, it was those others, the tax collectors and sinners, who were lost. The parable was meant to shock the Pharisees and the scribes and help them consider an alternative relational possibility beyond right and wrong, beyond judgment, reward and condemnation. The parable of the Prodigal Son, or the Merciful Father as it is called lately, does not include a solid happy ending with an easy to understand message: it does not say "Be cheerful, for everything turns out OK with God." This would be very cheap grace. The story does not end with a clear-cut solution. The younger son's repentance is not really a "repentance." The older son does not make a move to reconcile with his brother nor with his father. The father might not so much be celebrating his son's return as possibly a second chance at parenting, at restoring relationships. There is grace in the mess of life: reconciliation is an ongoing process initiated by God. This is what God does: God is in the business of reconciling people, families and communities. God puts people back on their feet. In [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#), Paul says that God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself. And this to such an extent that everything old has passed away; everything has become new. But not by magical intervention. In the messiness of life God makes it possible for people to reconsider their ways. Grace is never a quick fix: it's the inner transformation of attentive hearts and willing minds; it's growth in trust, hope, perseverance. Methodist theologian, Justo Gonzales, explains: "The present order of society, the values by which we live, the things on which we pin our hopes, they are all dead! Even while living in the present order we seek to live as those who know that it is dead, and to live, think, and

act as those who know that there is a new creation much more real and powerful than the old.” This restored order is no utopia: it’s the reality by which Jesus lived and died for; the fulfilment of the Christ Project: God’s vision for humanity, indeed for all of creation (Rom 8:18-25; Mt 24:3-8). Our calling is to embody God’s Word and live as reconciled people.

Lent is a time to consider both the grace of God that has sought and welcomed us and the constant danger that religious people face: thinking that we are better. No matter how far we have strayed, God’s at times invisible hand holds us with grace and new opportunities: brothers who have become alien to one another get back on speaking terms; a person beaten down by substance abuse finds the inner strength to go to AA meetings. We have experienced the joy of God welcoming us when we least deserved it, and for that, we must rejoice. But once we have experienced such welcome and rejoiced in it, we have to watch out for our tendency to stand with the never lost. Lent is an opportunity to recall to our mind the many times we have been found.

But it can also be a trap of our self-righteousness: a season when we examine ourselves, purify our lives, sacrifice our wants for the needs of others, and in general seek to become like the son who has always obeyed his father. When this happens, we must realize that the parable speaks to us not so much as the sinners who overhear it but rather as the Pharisees and scribes who resent Jesus’ welcoming attitude toward those who are not as good as they are. Lent invites us to count ourselves continually among both groups, as we seek to obey God in all things while also grounding our joy in the experience of being found. But Lent is also an opportunity for all who are given a second chance at love just as the father of the story who must have undergone many doubts, second-guessing, shame, guilt, and failure in general. For him, too, life gives ample opportunities to reset relationships in humility, starting with forgiving ourselves.

It all starts with me. If I have forgiven myself for being imperfect, I can now do it for everybody else, too. If I do *not* forgive myself, I am prone to pass on sadness, judgment, and condemnation. If God could include and allow the lost, the last, the least,

then why couldn't I? Who am I not to forgive and love others? Am I not included in God's love? If God asked me to love unconditionally and universally it's only because that is the way God operates.

Let us not get discouraged in the messiness of life, then, but recommit to the Christ Project, knowing that grace strengthens our resolution and God's love heals us.