

“Parables of Grace”

Grace and peace be to you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I am famous for falling asleep during movies. In movie theatres I constantly doze off and then wake up, catching only sporadic portions of the film. One might even go as far as calling my movie theatre experience an “expensive nap.” At home, I do the same thing. It sometimes takes me several nights of rewinding films to the place that I last remember watching before I am finally able to finish. The trouble with my viewing system is that movies are not meant to be watched in this fashion. When there is a lack of continuity in watching the film it often causes me to miss important elements, reoccurring themes, and sometimes even the point of the entire film.

Perhaps the most prominent example of this in my life has been with the Harry Potter movie series. I have dedicated countless hours attempting to watch these films, but I constantly fall asleep. I have viewed nearly every clip from these movies at least three times, but I have no idea what is really happening in them and I would fail even the most basic quiz about the films. Because I seem to be incapable of watching them as coherent units, the narrative and plot of these movies make absolutely no sense to me. My memory of the characters and series of events are disjointed and it is entirely my own fault. I’ve learned that when watching a movie, its best to watch it continuously with as few interruptions as possible. In doing this, I can more easily see the flow of the story and better understand the significance of characters and events.

It is sometimes the same when reading the Bible. The lectionary is a useful tool that helps readers focus in on stories and parables that might otherwise be avoided, but its disadvantage is that it sometimes creates a scenario similar to my movie watching experience where teachings, themes, and connections that generate the context of passages can get overlooked. A prime example of this can be seen in today’s lectionary text. It is a text often marked by commentators as being one of the most challenging in the New Testament. Many commentaries and preaching resources offer those tasked with preaching this text nothing more than a long winded “good luck!” St. Augustine once remarked in response to this passage by saying: “I cannot believe that this story came from the lips of our Lord.” Perhaps an editor might have instructed Luke to leave this parable out of the text, but here we have it, amidst a series of seven other parables in Luke’s gospel.

As a single entity, the text is so perplexing that the gospel writer Luke, himself, seems clueless about what to do with it and Jesus offers what appears to be multiple interpretations of the parable. There is an unclear message about the children of light learning from the shrewdness of their neighbors, there is a suggestive and confusing line about creating friends through means of dishonest wealth, and there is a teaching on faithful stewardship. Each of these ethically based lessons might provoke a sermon of their own, but when this text is viewed within the larger spectrum of Luke’s gospel, what becomes most prevalent is a message of forgiveness and grace.

Today’s narrative immediately follows the parable of the Prodigal Son and it precedes the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. When read in conjunction, these parables iterate the common themes of forgiveness and grace – God’s forgiveness and grace toward those who repent, God’s forgiveness and

grace toward those who trust in their own shrewdness, and Christ's call for the people of God to likewise extend forgiveness and grace toward one another.

We might recall that in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the younger son requests his inheritance early, receives it, and travels away from home where he squanders or recklessly spends it. The Greek word used to describe the son's actions literally means that he scattered or wasted his inheritance. Shortly after all of his money is wasted, a famine develops across the land and the son is forced to take a job caring for pigs. While feeding the pigs, he comes to the realization of his self-created situation and decides to humble himself by returning home and requesting a job as a hired hand within his father's household. His father of course runs to him, meeting him where he is along his journey home, and extends non-judgmental forgiveness and grace. The story symbolizes the Christian journey in which God through Christ meets humanity along the journey of sinfulness and extends unmerited forgiveness and grace.

Likewise, in today's parable of the Dishonest Manager, a similar situation occurs.

As was read, a rich man hires a person to manage their money. Some commentators suggest that this manager was a slave, but that seems unlikely given that this manager quickly becomes fearful about their job security. Slaves had a bit of certainty regarding work and so it seems that this dishonest manager was considered to be a freed person who would soon be eligible for hire. Nevertheless, the more important fact is that much like in the parable of the Prodigal Son, this manager is accused of squandering or wasting the rich person's property. The rich person questions the manager's actions and demands a record of his spending. The manager quickly recognizes the seemingly hopelessness of his situation, admits that he cannot work as a laborer or beggar, and therefore cunningly devises a plan that wins favor in the eyes of other business people who have borrowed from his rich employer.

It appears that at least a part of his dishonesty lies in the fact that before turning in his ledger, he begins forgiving generous portions of people's debts, which costs his employer large sums of money, but hopefully brings himself favor in the eyes of each debtor. Historians suggest that the 50% discount provided on oil and the 20% discount given toward wheat, as per Luke's example, could be equated with upwards of an entire year's wages. So one might imagine how ecstatically pleased these debtors would have become. But then, like the Prodigal Son who has to face his father, the dishonest manager has to give an account to the rich person. There is no recorded dialogue between the manager and the rich person, but it is clear that the manager's actions are made transparent. This is potentially because the entire community was likely celebrating in light of the generous forgiveness that they had received. And so, perhaps not wanting to upset the community or out of genuine compassion, the rich person commends the manager despite their dishonest actions. The question however, becomes a matter of what truly made the manager's actions dishonest? Was it that he wasted his employer's money? That he gave a generous forgiveness of what was owed? Or was it that he overcharged these people to begin with? Perhaps a mixture of all three. Either way, like in the story of the Prodigal Son, this wrong doing is met with unwarranted forgiveness, with grace.

And then, in case the disciples are still unclear about Christ's call for the children of God to likewise be forgiving, compassionate, and full of grace, a third parable is provided. In this parable, the one that immediately precedes today's lectionary text, Christ tells the story of a rich person who fails to extend grace and compassion to poor Lazarus who sits outside his gate. In the end, this person's riches cannot

save them, while Lazarus is offered eternal comfort alongside of Abraham. The rich person had an opportunity to extend or show grace toward Lazarus, but failed to. And so, in conjunction with one another, it becomes apparently clear that these parables, at least part, are about grace. They are about extending compassion and forgiveness, just as God who is rich in love and mercy, offers all people grace and forgiveness through Christ the Sacrificial Lamb.

Through the lens of grace, this confusing passage from the gospel of Luke becomes less about whether or not Jesus is commending dishonesty and more about God's loving response despite human failure and dishonesty. The focus is less on what has been done and is instead on what God is doing. They are parables about God's loving response and willingness to forgive. They are parables about God's amazing gift of grace. And there is comfort in knowing that God is lovingly kind and gracious despite human attempts to be cunning or shrewd. There is comfort in knowing that when failures and wrong-doings occur, whether intentional or non-intentional, whether known or unknown, in the presence of Jesus Christ, they are met with God's forgiveness and grace.

But there is also a challenge, a challenge to be like Christ when wrong-doing or dishonesty invades our own journey. A challenge to love, a challenge to forgive, a challenge to extend grace and compassion at every given opportunity, regardless of what we might think about the person or their situation, just as Christ meets all people, where they are at, regardless of inadequacies and failures. The gift that is given in today's gospel text is grace. Just as the gift that God promises in and through Jesus Christ, is likewise grace – unearned, unmerited, yet made obtainable, grace.

At the heart of Martin Luther's theology is the phrase "justified by grace through faith." Through faithful entrance into the waters of baptism, all are marked and claimed, born anew, as children of God, as children of grace. By water and word the baptized are claimed as daughters and sons, as heirs of God's promise and as servants of all. God's grace, received through faith, is where hope and forgiveness are made manifest. For through Christ, prodigals are welcomed home, those who cunningly squander and misuse their gifts find forgiveness, and the crippled, poor, and lonely are likewise met with perfect love and compassion. God is not stingy nor does God limit access to the perfect love made available in Christ. It is a love without limits, a love without borders, a love that holds us close in warm embrace when hearts are broken and when we mourn.

A love that forgives, a love that looks beyond all fault, a love that sees and desires to meet our needs. Amen.