

CARITAS FELLOWSHIP  
Parables #8, *The Prodigal Son*  
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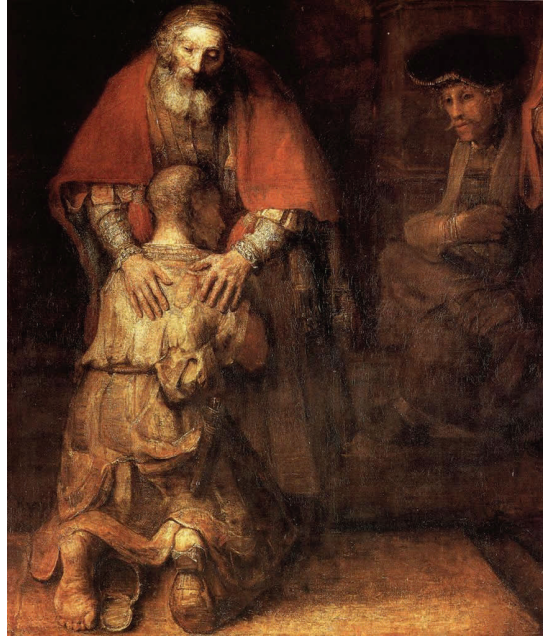
LUKE 15.1-2,15-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them"...

11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."' 20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' 28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' 31 And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"



GALATIANS 4.4-7

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

2 CORINTHIANS 5.17-19

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

## JOHN PAUL II

When God seeks out the rebellious son who flees far from his sight, he does so with particular insistence and love. God traveled the tortuous roads of sinners through his Son, Jesus Christ, who, bursting onto history's stage, is presented as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" (Jn 1: 29). Here are the first words he says in public: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt 4: 17). An important term appears which Jesus will repeatedly explain in words and deeds: "Repent", in Greek *metanoieite*, that is, make a *metanoia*, a radical change of mind and heart. It is necessary to turn away from evil and to enter the kingdom of justice, love and truth which is being established.

The trilogy of parables on divine mercy collected by Luke in chapter 15 of his Gospel is the most striking depiction of how God actively seeks out and lovingly awaits his sinful creature. Through his *metanoia* or conversion man returns, like the prodigal son, to embrace the Father who has never forgotten or abandoned him.

## ST. AMBROSE

Rise, run to the Church: here is the Father, here is the Son, here is the Holy Spirit. He runs out to meet you, for he hears you as you reflect within the secrecy of your heart. And while you are still at a distance, he catches sight of you and starts to run. He sees into your heart, he runs out so that no one will detain you, and furthermore he embraces you.... He throws his arms around your neck, to lift up what had been lying on the ground and to enable someone oppressed by the burden of sin and looking down at earthly things to turn his gaze again to heaven, where he should have been seeking his Creator. Christ throws his arms around your neck because he wants to remove the yoke of slavery and put a gentle yoke upon it.

## MIROSLAV VOLF

The basic challenge in all these conflicts—indeed, the basic challenge in all human conflicts—is the same one identified in the story of the Prodigal: the relationship between justice and peace, liberation and reconciliation, law and grace. Do you call first for justice, then peace? First liberation, then reconciliation? Or is it the other way around.

When I read the Prodigal story, I saw that the primacy was given to grace, embrace, reconciliation. Not cheap reconciliation—"nothing that happened between us matters, so let's hug each other and everything's going to be okay." Everything wouldn't be okay. But also not the pursuit of what you might call "strict justice." As a way of resolving problems between people, this simply will not work, because strict justice is impossible in the real world in which we live. The stage on which we fight for justice was partly built by unjust means, and the fight for justice itself always and inescapably creates new injustice. If our relationships are governed by the idea of strict justice, they will never be healed.

Instead, I see in this story a dual emphasis. One can distinguish in it the will to embrace and the embrace itself. The will to embrace the other is absolutely indiscriminate and unconditional. It does not depend on anything that the other person has done, and it applies to every and any individual. The Prodigal's father runs toward his son; he is willing to embrace him no matter what the son will say. The will is there. And yet the full reconciliation takes place after the Prodigal's confession. It takes confession for the Prodigal to be transformed into a son.

The grace we see demonstrated here affirms justice in the act of transcending it. Just as forgiveness always entails blame (try offering forgiveness to somebody who thinks he or she has done no wrong!), similarly, every act of grace entails affirmation of justice precisely in the act of transcending the claims of justice.

## RICHARD JOHN NEUHAUS

Of the son it is said, "He came to his senses," and coming to his senses he came to his father. Good Friday brings us to our senses. Our senses come to us as we sense that in this life and in this death is our life and our death. The truth about the crucified Lord is the truth about ourselves. "Know yourself," the ancient philosophers admonish us, for in knowing yourself is the beginning of wisdom. To which the

Psalmist responds, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” The beginning of wisdom is to come to our senses and know the fearful truth about ourselves, that we have wandered and wasted our days in a distant country far from home. We know ourselves most truly in knowing Christ, for in him is our true self. His cross is the way home to the waiting father. “If you would come to your senses,” he says, “come, follow me.”

The ancient Christian fathers spoke of the Christ event as the “recapitulation” of the entire human drama. In this one life, all lives are summed up; in the eternal present of this one life, the past is encompassed and the future is anticipated, and the life of Everyman and Everywoman is most truly lived. “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” he said. Not a way among other ways, not a truth among other truths, not a life among other lives, but the way of all ways, the truth of all truths, and the life of all lives. Recapitulation. It means, quite simply and solemnly, that this is your life, this is my life, and we have not come to our senses until we sense ourselves in the life, and death, of Christ.

#### FLANNERY O’CONNOR (“A Good Man Is Hard To Find”)

"She would of been a good woman," The Misfit said, "if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

#### KLYNE SNODGRASS

If Scripture seeks to give us an identity, which it does, this parable is a prime identity-shaping text. It says, in effect, that humans are not legitimately inhabitants of the far country, that they are not prodigals or slaves. Rather, they are children of their father and belong with their father. The prodigal declares that he is not worthy of his own identity and wants something less, but he no hired hand. Grace lets you be who you are supposed to be even though you do not deserve to or may not want to. The elder son is suspicious of joy and sees himself as equivalent to a servant, but the father insists that he is a son as well...

Joy is not an optional feature of the faith, nor can it be obtained by smiling or singing louder. It must emerge from an awareness of mercy and forgiveness of God enacted in the kingdom.

#### TIM KELLER

Jesus’s purpose is not to warm our hearts but to shatter our categories. Through this parable Jesus challenges what nearly everyone has ever thought about God, sin, and salvation. His story reveals the destructive self-centeredness of the younger brother, but it also condemns the elder brother’s moralistic life in the strongest terms. Jesus is saying that both the irreligious and the religious are spiritually lost, both life-paths are dead ends, and that every thought the human race has had about how to connect to God has been wrong...

So whose side is Jesus on? In *The Lord of the Rings*, when the hobbits ask the ancient Treebeard whose side he is on, he answers: “I am not altogether on anybody’s side, because nobody is altogether on my side. . . . [But] there are some things, of course, whose side I’m altogether not on.” Jesus’s own answer to this question, through the parable, is similar. He is on the side of neither the irreligious nor the religious, but he singles out religious moralism as a particularly deadly spiritual condition.

