

As we think about the topic of, “Prayer and Grace,” isn’t it interesting to remember that “grace” is also the name we use, for any of a number of short prayers said before a meal, to bless and give thanks for it. “Saying grace” before eating a meal is one of the common practices of Christianity! What does it suggest? It suggests that the basic sustaining element of life . . . food

- is a “gift of God” . . .
- an expression of God’s care and concern for us . . .
- a way of receiving God’s amazing and undeserved love . . . God’s grace!

It also suggests, I believe, that there is this connection between PRAYER and GRACE . . . between our communication with our Father in heaven and our relationship with our Father in heaven!

Martin Luther emphasized the importance of prayer: *“There is need every hour without ceasing to pray everywhere . . . to God . . . and it is true that it has never been more necessary to pray than at this time, and it will be more so from now on to the end of the world.”*

Luther also said that there is nothing quite like prayer to spur us into action and to reinforce our grace-filled relationship with God. *“Mumbling with the mouth is easy . . . but with earnestness of heart to follow the words in deep devotion, that is, with desire and faith, so that one earnestly desires what the words say, and not to doubt that it will be heard.”*

“Praying must be a constant effort . . . an effort that is harder than every other work. It requires a subdued and broken mind and a high and triumphant spirit. Christians must practice prayer frequently and with diligence. For ‘to be instant’ does not only mean ‘to be constantly engaged in something’ but it means also ‘to press on,’ ‘to quicken one’s pace,’ ‘to demand earnestly.’ So then, as there is nothing that Christians must do more frequently than praying, so there is also nothing that requires more labor and effort and, for this reason, is more effective and more fruitful.”

These passages from Luther’s various writings, show clearly that he placed great emphasis on the importance of being intentional in prayer and how to use prayer as a means of receiving God’s grace.

Our Gospel for today, is a beautiful example of the connection between grace and prayer . . . between God’s undeserved love for us and our relationship with Him. We call it the parable of the prodigal son. But it is really not a story about the Son! It’s a about the Father! And I want to consider it from the perspective of the Father. What did you learn about the Father in this story? What is the Father, really all about?

So today, I want to share a very brief Bible Study on this very familiar story. I want to highlight some of the key words and concepts to help you to understand more about this wonderful example of grace, so I invite you to follow along with the text as printed in your bulletins!

1. Notice first, that the story of the prodigal son is told in the context of Jesus' relationship with some very religious people, who are having an issue with who Rabbi Jesus was associating with. And I'm afraid that most of us would have agreed with the Pharisees and Scribes on this issue.

- As parents, aren't we concerned about who our children may associate with?
- As church leaders, don't we have to be careful about who we may be seen with and where?
- The concern about Jesus' eating partners has some legitimacy.

And notice also that in this context, Jesus is **not** out searching for and seeking the lost. The Bible says that the tax collectors and sinners are coming to him, to hear him, which is exactly what Jesus asked for in the verse just before the Gospel: "*Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!*" (14:35b). Jesus seems to encourage these tax collectors and sinners, to eat with him.

2. The whole idea of who we are "*eating with*" (*synesthio*) seems to have been a problem in the early church. Remember how Peter is criticized for eating with Gentiles (Acts 11:3), but not criticized for baptizing them! Remember in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (chapter 8) that members of the church were criticized for eating food offered to idols! And don't we still struggle with who should be welcome at the Lord's Table to eat with Jesus!

- At what age does Jesus welcome people to eat with him?
- Is it necessary to be baptized in order to be welcome and eat with Jesus?
- Does one have to be a believer first before sharing at the Lord's table? It would seem that if these "sinners" were coming to listen to Jesus, they had to have had some kind of belief in him.
- Does one have to be acceptable to us before being acceptable to God?
- It was interesting this past week . . . I was involved in a series of e-mails with fellow Lutheran Senior Pastors across the country talking about whether it was appropriate to have Communion at Easter services when there are so many visitors and un-churched people at worship. Is it appropriate to offer something like Holy Communion to people who don't understand it, who don't know anything about it, and who very frankly don't and probably won't partake of it the rest of the year?

These are all questions that are still asked today, albeit in different forms! So the Pharisees and the Scribes were not all that different than we are!

But, as Jesus usually does, instead of addressing their concerns directly, he tells them a story, a parable, and the parable begins . . . "*There was a man who had two sons.*"

- Notice that they are not referred to as "brothers" at this point. "*there was a man who had two sons.*" So from the very beginning of the parable, the important relationship is not between the brothers. It is between the sons and their Father! Again, the parable of the prodigal son is not about the son. It's a story about the Father!

3. There is also a very strange and unusual event that happens early in the story. It's unusual because in the family traditions in the Middle East, the older son is the heir. And in the family protocol, the older son always speaks first! But notice in this story, the younger son speaks first, not the older son. So the younger son is out of his place already! And what he says is even more astonishing. He basically tells his father to "*drop dead.*"

From the Middle Eastern traditions among families, the younger son's request is totally wrong and illegitimate. It is an unthinkable request. A father only gives the inheritance in death! Logically, most fathers would explode with anger at such an inappropriate request. But this father does not explode. Instead, he grants a request that was completely unimaginable in his time. And so we begin to see that this Father is a very unusual father!

4. And then in vs.12, there is a very important mis-translation that is made when the father divides things up. Our translation says, "*he divided his **property** between them.*" But the Greek word is "*bios*" – which is more accurately translated as "*his life*" . . . The father literally "*divided between them, his life (bios).*" It's more than just his property, what he owns. It is in fact everything he is . . . as well as everything he has. And later, vs. 30, the older brother will actually accuse the younger brother of "*devouring [the father's] **life** (bios) with prostitutes.*"

When we think of what Jesus will ultimately do, in terms of his sacrifice on the cross, we can see that the Father literally gives his life to his son. And likewise, the older son also received his share - a double share - of his **father's life and property!**

5. In vs. 13, we read that the younger son goes out and squanders his property in reckless living. In other words, he spends it all. He uses it up quickly on things that don't matter. We're not just talking about an immoral lifestyle on the part of the son. He is a spend-thrift and spends money like it is going out of style. The accurate translation here does not imply immoral behaviors, but rather, **thoughtless actions.**

Another way of translating it is "*scattering*" (*diaskorpizo*) the money without any thought of future consequences (*asotos*).

He is living just for the moment, which may have worked out all right, except for the natural disaster of famine which he hadn't counted on. The younger son's situation was not completely his own fault. There was also the famine, of which he had no part in causing.

6. In vs. 16 the younger son reaches his low point. He wishes he were a pig! At least the pigs had something to eat. And then the text says that the young man "*came to himself.*"

Usually, we think of this as his moment of repentance. But that is not the meaning of repentance that these stories in Luke 15 convey . . . the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Prodigal Son. Repentance in these stories occurs when the *lost is found.*

Some Arabic translations of these words read that the Prodigal "*got smart.*" He got smart in the sense that he now was ready to look out for himself. He developed a plan. He knew that his father had many hired hands who had bread enough and to spare. So he decided to go back home. He knows he can't go back as a son. He won't go back as a slave. So he will go back as a hired hand

- He will not live at home, and not join the family.
- Instead, he will pay is own way.
- But first he must convince his father to support his plan.

The son’s plan, that is, is to earn his restored status.

- Give me a second chance. I’ll earn it back and repay you.
- I am not now worthy to be called your son, but I will be if you give me a chance”

7. I hadn’t noticed this before. The younger son wants to return as a hired hand, not a slave. There is a distinction between a “*hired hand*” (*misthios*) who is paid for his work; and a “*slave*” (*doulos*) who is the property of the owner.

- The older son uses the phrase, “*working like a slave for you*” in vs. 29 to refer to his understanding of continual “slaving” for his father. He feels like he has been a slave to his father. Well, what kind of relationship is that?
- In contrast to the first two parables, the father is not going out seeking after his “lost” son. He stays home. Similar to Jesus in the first three verses, he offers something that will attract the “lost” to come “home.” In the introduction, Jesus offers teaching that draws sinners to him. In the parable, it is food! — although the returning son receives much more!

We overhear the younger son rehearsing his speech. And then we will hear him give it to his father — except that the father interrupts him before he is able to say his last line. And the timing of this interruption is significant.

In the rehearsal (vs. 18-19) he concludes his brief confession with; “*treat me as one of your hired hands.*” But before he says that line to his father, his father has already ordered a long robe, a ring, sandals, and a celebration.

The “*ring & sandals:*” show symbolically, that the young man’s father has fully accepted him as his son. A ring was a sign of high position in the family. Sandals showed that he was a son instead of a slave, since slaves did not usually wear sandals.

Precisely in the son’s speech where we would expect him to ask to be received as a hired hand, the father receives him as an honored son. There are some significant comments about the act of the father running to his son while he is still a long way off.

8. In ancient Palestine it was regarded as un-becoming . . . a loss of dignity . . . for a grown man to run. But this father sets aside all concern for propriety and he runs. “*He ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.*”

Arabic translations of this story actually refuse to translate this “running!” They avoid this because it is clear that the father here is *acting as God acts towards prodigals*. Running is public is too humiliating to attribute to a person who symbolizes God. Why this lack of proper actions by the father? The father’s response is described in a rush of verbs that move rapidly from seeing to running, embracing, and kissing. By these actions the father gives an emotional welcome before the son speaks a word. The father does not wait for explanations, confessions, or promises.

Nor is he concerned with the restoration of his own damaged honor. It has been suggested that running to meet the son while he is still at a distance also has the purpose of protecting the son from the scorn of the rest of the village, who would remember the way that he had treated his father and make their feelings known.

9. In vs. 23, we read about “*the fattened calf.*” This is a celebration. This is the public display of reconciliation. Meat was not usually part of the daily diet of people. The whole animal would have to be eaten in a short time or the meat would spoil, so we can see that the father is expecting a large group. Perhaps the whole village will be invited.

This is not a quiet family gathering. The father is making a public gesture to proclaim his acceptance of his son so that the whole community will understand and so the same. All of this is done without requiring any period of testing or acts of public penance from the wayward son.

10. But this party is supposed to be in honor of the Father — like in the two previous parables of Jesus . . . the parties are for the shepherd who found the lost sheep and the women who finds the lost coin. So, when the older son refuses to join the party, this is an indication of not honoring his father!

In vs. 27, one of the father’s slaves reminds the older son of their relationships: “*Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf.*” But the older brother will not use these terms.

His relationship with his father is one of an obedient slave (vs. 29). When talking to his father, he says “*but when this son of yours came back . . .*” (vs. 30).

But the father reminds him of these relationships: “*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*” The father is seeking to re-establish the proper relationship between himself and his older son. He is also reminding him that he has a brother as well. “*This brother of yours was dead and has come to life. He was lost and has been found.*” (vs. 31)

Several years we took a group from St. John’s on a Baltic Cruise. One of the stops was St. Petersburg. And one of the special opportunities was to visit The Hermitage, one of the largest and most comprehensive art galleries in the world, with thousands of paintings and sculptures from all over the world.

In one of the galleries there were a large collection of paintings by Rembrandt. I distinctly remember one of those entitled, *The Prodigal Son*. Henri Nouwen comments in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, based on his contemplation of [Rembrandt’s great painting](#). . . a beautiful image of God’s grace!

“*Often I have asked friends to give me their first impression of Rembrandt’s Prodigal Son. Inevitably, they point to the wise old man who forgives his son: the benevolent patriarch. The longer I look at ‘the patriarch’, the clearer it becomes to me that Rembrandt has done something quite different from letting God pose as the wise old head of a family. It all began with the hands. The two are quite different. The father’s left hand touching the son’s shoulder is strong and muscular. The fingers are spread out and cover a large part of the prodigal son’s shoulder and back. I can see a certain pressure, especially in the thumb. That hand seems not only to touch, but, with its strength, also to hold. Even though there is a gentleness, in the way the father’s left hand touches his son, it is not without a firm grip.*”

“How different is the father’s right hand! This hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft, and very tender. The fingers are close to each other and they have an elegant quality. It lies gently upon the son’s shoulder. It wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother’s hand . . .

“As soon as I recognized the difference between the two hands of the father, a new world of meaning opened up for me. The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand. He holds, and she caresses. He confirms and she consoles.

He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present.

That gentle and caressing right hand echoes for me the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘Can a woman forget her baby at the breast, feel no pity for the child she has born? Even if these were to forget, I shall not forget you. Look, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.’”

Let’s close with a prayer from Diadra Price, a contemporary spiritual writer and author . . . her *Grace Prayer*:

*For Thee I thirst.
Into Thy hands I commit my Spirit
(my soul, my body, my life, this problem, all unforgiving states).
Thy will is my will.
Thy will be done through me.
Heal me at depth.
Reveal that which needs to be revealed.
Heal that which needs to be healed so I can glorify You, God,
And live in the fullness of grace. It is finished.*