

March 31, 2019
Vicar Jonah

Lent 4
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

“It’s Not Fair!”

May the grace and peace of almighty God be with you.

My first opportunity to speak on today’s gospel text was at a Baptist inner city youth group. I was forewarned that this particular group had many “at risk youth” who had posed a problem for previous youth leaders. I quickly discovered that they were in fact a very interesting group of young people who had a strong sense of entitlement, it was as though the entire world owed them something. And there was, of course, one boy in particular who made it very difficult to speak to the group. As I attempted to explain this parable of the prodigal son, young Jacob created numerous distractions, but what bothered me the most was his demand for candy. It was tradition that after the bible story, the children would each receive ONE piece candy for being a good listener. Young Jacob, of course, wanted his candy before the bible story had started and he had no intention of being a good listener. “It’s not fair!” he screamed and cried throughout the entire lesson. In light of this, you might imagine how he then responded when the bible story ended and all of the other children got candy, except for him. It was a performance worthy of an Oscar, but, everyone agreed that it would be unfair to give him a piece of candy when he had not done his part to earn it.

Before we closed in prayer and departed for the week, I motioned for little Jacob to come to the front. As he stood beside me, I asked the other children if I should give him a piece of candy. Of course, the answer was no – “that would be unfair!” they exclaimed. I then asked if any of them could relate to how to Jacob felt. A few children shared stories about times when they misbehaved and were punished for it, but despite their shared experience, none of them thought that Jacob should be given a piece of candy. I then turned toward little Jacob and asked if he still thought that he deserved to have candy. He looked up at me with sad eyes and whispered: “no.” And so, I reached into the box, pulled out an entire handful of candy, and gave them to that child. As you might imagine, the room lit up with envy as the other children yelled: “that’s not fair! It’s not fair! It’s not fair!”

In today’s gospel narrative, the older son responds in a way that sounds much like the children in my youth group: “that’s not fair!”

Both Christians and non-Christians are familiar with this parable. It is one of the most well-known stories from the Bible. In this story, Jesus explains that a man has two sons who he divides his property between. The younger son takes his inheritance and rushes off to a distant country where he spends everything that he has been given. But then, a famine hits and this son finds himself in great need. He takes a job feeding pigs and then devises a plan to return home and throw himself at the mercy of his father. To his surprise, his father meets him with love and compassion and hosts a celebration to commemorate the return of his son who was once lost and is now found. But, of course, like the children in my youth group, the older son who had dedicated his life to living and working in a way that fully adhered his father’s expectations, is upset and he responds in a way that can perhaps be paraphrased as “that’s not fair!”

In Luke’s gospel, this parable is situated amidst four other parables that hold a similar narrative. There is the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the dishonest manager. The parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and today’s parable of “the Good Father” or “the Prodigal son,

“show what happens when kindness and compassion are actively at work. In today’s text, we read that the father of these two children experiences what Luke refers to as *splagchnizomai*, a Greek word that describes the act of being inwardly overcome or filled with compassion (*splagchnizomai*). These parables are then contrasted with the parable of the dishonest manager, where that same *splagchnizomai* or compassion, is not extended.

The common theme that Jesus is highlighting in each of these parables is *splagchnizomai*, compassion. He uses these four parables to distinguish between what might appear to be fair and what happens when these situations are approached from a perspective of compassion. All of this, of course, is in response to the complaints of the Pharisees, who are accusing Jesus of wrongfully welcoming and sharing the intimacy of a meal with tax collectors and “sinners.”

From the perspective of the Pharisees, Christ’s actions are unconventional and perhaps unjust. Why would the supposed Son of God be spending his time with sinners instead of religiously upright people who adhere to the Law, like the Pharisees? From a morally upright perspective that is focused on adhering to the Law given through Moses, Christ’s actions are questionable and confusing. But, from the perspective of *splagchnizomai*, from the perspective of (compassion) that is being introduced in these parables, Christ’s actions begin to make better sense. Jesus is indirectly responding to the accusations of the Pharisees by showing them a different perspective or approach. By showing them the life changing power of compassion. And when viewed from a Lutheran perspective, one might note similarities between the definition of *splagchnizomai* and our theology of grace.

In an essay on Romans, Luther noted that: “the law works fear and wrath; [while] grace works hope and mercy.” Grace, through faith, is the gift that God gives in and through the promises of Jesus Christ. Grace is a gift that none can earn, a gift that is not based on our accomplishments or failures, but is based entirely in God’s unconditional love. Our Christian faith is rooted in grace. Luther notes that his: “Faith is a living [and] daring confidence in God's grace, [which is] so sure and certain that the [he] would stake his life on it a thousand times.”(Basic Theological Writings) It is like the well-known hymn suggests: Grace has brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.

The gospel message that is present in and through today’s gospel text is a message of grace, and the beauty of grace is that it makes life not fair. Grace makes life not fair. Through the sole perspective of the law and that of the Pharisees, human sinfulness cannot merit the gift of salvation. But through the gift and perspective of God’s mercy and compassion, through the gift and perspective of grace, an otherwise unobtainable level of justification is made available to us.

Little Jacob and the rest of the youth group learned that through grace, Jacob could receive the gift of candy and from that day onward, there was not a single issue with his behavior. Compassion and grace changed the perspective through which he saw the world, just as compassion and grace can change our perspective of ourselves and of one another. And that is perhaps the challenge of today’s text, will we live graciously? Will we extend God’s gift of grace to those whom, like us, do not deserve it? To those we find challenging and difficult to deal with? To those on the fringes of our society? To those who mistreat or disagree with us? Will we allow the light of God’s love to shine through us? Will we open our arms with forgiveness and compassion to welcome and accept the people that Jesus calls us to love and to serve? Will we look past the disagreements and conflicts that divide us as a body of Christ and learn to

celebrate the shared gift of God's holy and almighty presence that is actively at work within each of God's children?

God's loving arms are open and ready to welcome us into the presence of ever-lasting grace. Like the father who welcomed his son home from the uncleanness of the pig trough, God welcomes us home despite our sinful and human nature, despite the uncleanness of our sin. And in the arms of God's perfect embrace, we find forgiveness, mercy, healing, and compassion. We find a newness of perspective, a newness of hope, and the promise of life everlasting. By grace we are saved. God, through perfect grace, looks beyond our faults and forgives us. We are justified by faith through grace – and that same grace will lead us home into the eternal presence of God, where our loving Father waits for us with open arms and with love and compassion that will never end. Amen.