

The Scandal of Mercy, the Surprise of Grace
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32; II Corinthians 5:16-21
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The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

In this parable, mercy is a scandal and grace is a surprise until we see that the parable is not about us but about God

Like many people my age, there was a time in my teenage years when I was enthralled with reading the classic fantasy by JRR Tolkien, “The Lord of the Rings.” Although there is much in those books that is magical, fantastic, spine-tingling, and thrilling, there is one idea that has stuck with me. The tales of course are centered around hobbits, those small, hairy-footed people who live mostly in dwellings in the sides of hills. But hobbits have an interesting custom. On a hobbit's birthday, he or she does not receive gifts from family and friends. Instead the birthday-celebrating hobbit gives gifts—and perhaps throws a party—for all of his or her family and friends. And since hobbits tend to be social beings with large families, for most hobbits there was a fairly good chance of receiving at least one present a week. I always thought that was a great idea and I wondered how Tolkien came up with that idea. At first thought that seems like a strange idea. Think about it. Don't we usually say, “It's my birthday. This is my day. Everyone should be doing for me, paying attention to me. It's me we are celebrating. Shouldn't people be giving me gifts to say how glad they are that I am here.” Of course if you really think about it in terms of the total number of gifts and parties, the hobbit practice makes much more sense. Instead of celebrating a birthday-- “my birthday” --once a year, the hobbit celebrates birthdays many times a year, on every day that a loved one has a birthday. What a great idea!¹

What this really tells me is that I think that Tolkien, who was certainly a faithful Christian, and whose faith comes out in his writing, truly understood this parable and he understood the concept of grace. And I don't think that we always understand grace. I also think we understand, but we don't particularly like the twin concept of mercy. Grace and mercy, but where would we be without them? It makes me think that Tolkien understood the parable of the Prodigal Son, because grace and mercy are

¹ From Rodney Clapp, *Feasting on the Word, Year C*, vol. 2, p. 116.

perhaps no where better illustrated. As Jesus tells us the story, a wealthy landowner has two sons. The younger son cannot wait until Dad dies in order to get his inheritance. This is a huge insult. It's saying, Dad, I wish you were dead already, but since you're not, can I have the money I'm going to get when you do finally kick the bucket? In spite of the insult, the father gives his younger son his share of the property. The young man runs off to Las Vegas and blows all the money at the roulette table and buying drinks for so-called friends. After his money is all gone, he gets a job feeding pigs, not the best occupation for a good Jewish boy. So he decides to go home and take his chances with his father, because even if his dad takes him back as a hired hand, it will be far better than where he's working now. So he heads home, preparing himself all along the way for the humiliation that he knows is coming. But as he gets close to home, his father runs up the road to meet him with open arms. The boy says, "father I am not worthy to be called your son," but he can't even get the rest of the speech out before his dad is wrapping him in a new robe and putting rings on his finger and shoes on his feet and commanding that the fatted calf be prepared for a serious party to which they'll invite the whole town. That's grace. It has been said that grace is giving someone something they don't deserve. A free gift, something you didn't have coming but just out of love. Grace. Tolkien's hobbits understood grace. As Buechner says, "Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace.

Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever *tried* to love somebody?"²

Being welcomed into the arms of his father, the prodigal experiences grace. The party the father throws for him is grace. Jesus is trying teach us through this parable that grace is essential to the Christian faith. Because a strange idea in our Christian faith is that people are saved by grace. There's nothing you have to do. Nothing. No deed to be done, no creed to assert, just a gift to accept. Just

2 Buechner, Fredrick. *Listening to Your Life*. p. 289.

arms to walk into. Grace is a gift that we don't deserve.

If grace is giving someone what they don't deserve, mercy is the flip side of that coin. Mercy is not giving someone what they do deserve. And that's why some people don't like this parable. Because it's not fair. We want life to be fair. This younger brother squandered a whole lot of his dad's money and now he's accepted back into the family like nothing has happened. The older brother is rightly upset. Everything that his father is spending now on his wasteful brother is money that he's being cheated out of when it comes to his inheritance. It's not fair at all. That's the scandal of mercy. It's not fair. We want life to be fair. We want reward to match effort. We want everyone to receive what they are due. Does it bother us to think of someone who is lucky with wealth or success when they really did not put in the work? We want it to be fair. Does it bother us to think of people who might lead terrible lives, be selfish, uncaring, unfaithful, but then if they decide on their deathbed to convert or to proclaim their belief in God, that God lets them into heaven? How fair is that?

It's totally not fair. But I have to admit that I don't want God to be fair. In fact, I'm counting on God to not be fair. Fair would be to give everyone what they deserve. I don't want what I deserve. I want so much more than that. I want mercy. I want grace. That's what I'm counting on. So many times I read this parable and I see myself as the prodigal, being such a disappointment to God and to people around me, because let's be honest, we all have been a disappointment at times. But I know that God welcomes me home and grace comes as a surprise. Other times I see myself as the older brother, always wanting what I deserve and never realizing that God wants more than that for me. But because I am so upset at the scandal of God's mercy to someone I think deserves something worse from God if the universe were fair, I fail to see that I am as much a recipient of God's mercy as I am of God's grace. And when I think in either of those ways I forget that as Paul says that God is doing far more than I can think or imagine because he is making me new.

For in the end, this is not a parable about us, whether we relate to the older brother or the younger. It's not a parable about us it is about God. The parable is more about the "determined, compassionate,

infinite providence of God than it is about the ways of God's prodigal children. In the end this parable points to the great embrace and deep expansive love, compassion, and justice of God, deeper, wider and higher than our imaginings.”³

In his book “God Has a Dream,” Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes:

I have a dream, God says. Please help me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family.⁴

Maybe that's when mercy is not a scandal because in love we not only want to be a recipient of God's mercy, we want it for everyone and we want to be part of that—part of the ministry of reconciliation that Paul talks about, and so we become merciful too. Maybe that's when grace is not a surprise because our eyes become opened to all that we have received by God's amazing grace, and so we become givers as well—because we want to participate in that loving family.

3 Curry, Michael. *Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol. 2.* p. 121.

4 Tutu, Desmond. *God has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time.* p. 19-20.