

The Choice for Grace

God gives us an amazing freedom. We have so many choices to make day by day. Someone once told me that poverty is not an absence of money. Poverty is an absence of choices. The season of Lent is a time to reflect upon the choices we make – in the light of Jesus' choices:

- to go to Jerusalem
- to confront the authorities
- to accept the cross

In today's Gospel, often called "the Parable of the Prodigal Son," we see the choices of two brothers and their father. The narrative flows through three "acts," three sets of choices.

First, we hear about the younger brother demanding his inheritance before his father has died. He takes his newfound wealth, leaves home, goes to a distant country, and loses everything. This younger son chooses his freedom. He abuses his freedom, so he loses it.

The father was free to respond by telling him, "No, you can't have your inheritance until I die..." But the father honors his son's choice, his freedom, even if it means losing his own respect, giving up some of his beloved land, letting go of his younger son.

I wonder how and when we have experienced this choice for freedom? Who taught us how to choose freedom with responsibility, rather than freedom with abuse - our parents? our mentors? our teachers? our coaches? our supervisors? Who has helped us realize our choices, our freedoms?

The second set of choices comes as the younger son realizes his life is such a mess that he has to return home and ask his father for forgiveness. This is the beginning of the choice for grace, for love, for reconciliation. Knowing God's healing grace comes as we experience forgiveness, receive forgiveness, give forgiveness.

In the early Church of the first centuries, the season of Lent was a time to restore to communion those who had been separated from the Body of Christ because of serious sins. Lent was a season of forgiveness. On Ash Wednesday we prayed the Litany of Penitence. We all need forgiveness and we can all extend forgiveness to others.

As we walk the way of the cross, we know Jesus' first words as he is crucified. "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.*" (Luke 23:34)

The father welcomes the son home with love and forgiveness. The father chooses grace. He celebrates the return with a feast. Jesus often uses a feast to symbolize the celebration of God's grace.

Finally, we come to the third and last choice for grace. The older brother is angry and disrespects his father's choices. He will not participate in the celebration, and he criticizes his father. The father,

for the third time in the parable, chooses grace. He doesn't get angry. He affirms his love for his older son. He shows this son his unique place, his special relationship with the father. "*All that is mine is yours.*" The story ends with the father asking the older son to choose grace.

We don't know what the older brother ultimately chooses. We do know that Jesus told this story to the Pharisees and scribes who were "*grumbling*" and critical of Jesus' relationship with "*sinners.*" Many of the religious authorities rejected Jesus. Some plotted to have him arrested and executed.

But at least two – Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea - believed in Jesus. They made the choice for grace. They risked their own security and gave Jesus a proper burial after requesting the Council to give him a fair hearing.

One author and pastor calls this parable "the story of the two lost sons." He believes that the story expresses the very heart of Christianity. He writes, "I have seen more people encouraged, enlightened, and helped by this passage, then by any other text."¹

Jesus uses this parable to help us understand God's love, God's grace. St. Luke, alone, includes it in his Gospel because, for Luke, Jesus is the one who heals, the one who is the incarnate reality of God's grace.

So we should return to this story of the two lost sons over and over and over again. It leads us close to God's love. It helps us to choose grace, always.

Joshua 5:9-12
Psalm 32:1-6, 12
2 Corinthians 5:17-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God*, Dutton Publishers, New York, 2008, p.xiii.