

The Rev. Shelley Ryan
St. Luke's Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
The Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 5 & 6, 2016
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 & 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Greek philosopher and scientist, Aristotle once said “The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.” Many people believe that art is a universal language that all human beings can relate to. (In fact some would go as far as to say that art transcends)

I have been exposed to various forms of art for most of my life, as my mother is an artist, as was her mother and grandmother. My mother, who is a weaver (as well as a stone carver), has a large floor to ceiling loom in her home, and the warp threads are almost always filled with fibers of all colors and textures. When she obtained her degree in fine art, she closely adhered to the rules of the art world, so to speak and she stayed within the perimeters, to which she had been taught. However, as she became a more seasoned artist, her vision expanded and she began to take more risks with her art. As a result, her art became more unique, more powerful, and more beautiful than ever before. When she ‘stepped outside of the norm’ her creativity flourished. One of my favorite weavings that she created was a most unusual piece. The weaving consisted of beautifully woven soft, fine threads of different shades of blue, green and gold. But intertwined with these fine threads were prickly, coarse fibers, and metals. By themselves, the coarse fibers and metals were not seen to be so beautiful, but when they were integrated with the soft, fine threads the result was a beautiful masterpiece. Yet in spite of this, some in the art world would perhaps say that my mother bent the rules by integrating the different mediums.

In today's gospel passage Jesus is criticized by the Pharisees for partaking in a meal with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus' action went against the norm and 'broke the rules' so to speak. It's important to note, however, that the Pharisees were not always hostile to Jesus, as they dined with him on occasion, and they even warned him about potential dangers from his adversaries. However, they would only be open to sharing in this meal, if certain conditions were met. On a side-note, one description for the origin of the word 'Pharisee' is derived from the Hebrew verb 'badal' (pronounced bah-dull), which means 'separate.' The Pharisees wanted to separate themselves from those who were known to be social outcasts. In order to enjoy their company, Jesus was required to do the same. Clearly we know that Jesus will not adhere to their norms or their demands for as we all know - Jesus would rather seek out the lost than remain with the majority.

This truth is so powerfully illustrated in the familiar gospel of the prodigal son. The message that I preached last week was about repentance and free will. This same theme is woven throughout the passage of the prodigal son, as this parable illustrates human initiative and repentance in the process of reconciliation, hence the reunion or bringing together, with the Divine. Yes, the father blissfully welcomes the prodigal son home upon his return, but there is no indication that the father went looking for him. Now this is not to imply that the father didn't love his son, or that he was not concerned about his whereabouts. Remember...He has given us free will. He forgives his son, but the son is the one who initiates the process of reconciliation. Yes, the son chose to squander his inheritance by living a wild and perhaps overly festive lifestyle, but he throws himself on his father's mercy saying "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you: I am no longer worthy to be called your son." And what happens? He is embraced by his loving father who expresses Divine grace and compassion toward him.

Grace and compassion – this is what our heavenly Father offers us. Grace is always available to us, but it requires human effort to recognize it. Now allow me a moment to focus on the older brother who was angered by this unconditional grace that the father demonstrated to his younger son. After all, he had remained obedient to his father, and had adhered to societal expectations. His focus and commitment hinged on ‘duty’ rather than free choice – or free will. (MAYBE interject story of Christmas Eve at ECR) Now this is not to insinuate that we ought not live within the norms of our society to a degree, as this is simply necessary. But it is equally valuable that we maintain the awareness of the authentic beings that God created each of us to be.

The crux of the story of the prodigal son focuses upon Grace. Grace...So what is grace? We hear the word frequently, but do we realize what it truly means?

As St. Augustine, who is deemed by many to be one of the greatest of Christian thinkers of all times illustrates the following in his treatise on the ‘Nature of Grace.’ He echoes several passages from Paul’s letters throughout his writing.

But the flaw, which darkens and weakens all those natural goods, so that it has need of illumination and healing, it has not contracted from its blameless Creator— but from that original sin, which it committed by free will. For, if we are now newly created in Christ, we were, for all that, children of wrath, even as others, but God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, has quickened us together with Christ, by whose grace we were saved. This grace, however, of Christ, without which neither infants nor adults can be saved, is not rendered for any merits, but is given *gratis*, on account of which it is also called grace. Being justified, says the apostle, freely through His blood. End quote.

Probably one of the most poignant stories that exemplifies the truest meaning of grace is the story of John Newton.

The story of John Newton is truly the story behind “Amazing Grace.” One would be hard pressed to imagine, let alone to live, a blasphemous life equal to Newton’s early years.

In his youth he became the captain of a slave ship, landing at least one load of his human cargo in Charleston, South Carolina. It is reported that at times he was so drunk and destitute that even his crew regarded him as little more than an animal. Once he fell overboard and his ship’s crew refused to drop a boat to him. Instead they threw a harpoon at him, with which they dragged him back into the ship. He seemed oblivious to the plight of the poor black souls chained in the hold of his ship.

His willful and wanton disregard for all that is right and holy led him into a life plagued with despair, dangers at sea, abuse, public floggings, destitution, depression, near drownings and miraculous escapes. During those years Newton often entered into a state of spiritual awakening. Consequently those times were short-lived, and he invariably lapsed into a more wicked and loathsome direction.

One particular harrowing experience at sea was used of the Lord to cause young Newton to seriously consider his standing before a holy God. After being at sea for several months with a load of lumber, livestock and beeswax, the ship ran into a violent storm. So severe was the gale that the otherwise seaworthy vessel was in danger of sinking. When the livestock were washed overboard, the crew tied themselves to the ship to keep from being swept into the sea.

For four weeks, because of damage to the ship, the sailors despaired of life. Most of their waking hours were spent at the pumps to lighten the ship of water she had taken on. Rations were so low the men feared starvation. When they finally reached a port in Ireland, Newton began a sincere effort to become right with God. Two years later John Newton married his teenage sweetheart. During the following fourteen years, he continued studying for the ministry, and at age thirty-nine became a pastor in Olney, England. In 1779 Newton published a hymnal “The Olney Hymns” in which he placed 281 of his own works, including “Amazing Grace.” The melody that is so familiar to our nation is a traditional American melody published as early as 1831. The hymn can be found in page 671 of our Hymnal.

Jesus exemplified grace. He included with open arms all people to be woven into the colorful tapestry of God’s kingdom, whether accepted by the mores of society, or not. Thus is beautifully illustrated in the words of Christopher Edmonton “The parable of the prodigal son can be seen as a prelude to the resurrection. It’s an Easter story of its own kind, an Easter story that reaffirms that God’s kingdom and entails death-defying love. For in God’s kingdom, the law is grace, the currency is mercy, and the economy is forgiveness everlasting.”

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see...