



Westminster Presbyterian Church

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In Ordinary Time God is With Us: Divine Grace and Human Gratitude

Scripture Lessons: Luke 15:11-24 and Luke 17:11-19

Fan Fiction (or “FanFic”)—any work which embellishes, alters, or rewrites the work of another (usually a published author) with new storylines, settings and characters, and (sometimes) alternative beginnings or endings. Fan Fiction is defined by both being related to its subject’s canonical fictional universe (“the canon”) and simultaneously existing outside it. It has become especially popular with the advent of the Internet.

Midrash—an ancient Jewish interpretation of a Biblical text, often consisting of an embellishment of the scriptural narrative. One scholar has called Midrash “an imaginative way of updating, enhancing, augmenting, explaining and justifying the sacred text.” Some Midrash discussions are highly metaphorical, and many Jewish authors stress that they are not to be taken literally.

The first step to piety is to recognize that God is a father to us—John Calvin.

Preface to First Scripture Lesson:

Before there was Fan Fiction, there was Midrash.

You may know about fan fiction: it’s when fans of a book, a movie, a TV series or something like that, write their own versions—their own sequels and prequels, backstories and front=stories, takeoffs and spinoffs—of the story. Harry Potter, Game of Thrones, Hunger Games, Sherlock Holmes, all the Marvel superheroes—all have inspired lots of “FanFic,” as it’s known—it’s all over the internet. There’s even fictional Fan Fiction: In John Green’s latest novel, *Turtles All the Way Down*, one of the characters, Daisy, writes fan fiction about *Star Wars*, in particular, the character Chewbacca—the Wookie, you know, the one with all the hair and who wails—and his romance with the human female, Jedi, Rey, who, in the movie, is played by another Daisy, the actress Daisy Ridley. It can get complicated.

You may know about Midrash: it was started thousands of years ago, before there was an internet, by rabbis writing sequels and prequels, backstories and front=stories, takeoffs and spinoffs about Bible stories—in an effort to better understand and appreciate those stories. These Midrash-writing rabbis had a particular fondness for the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. In fact, if you remember the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*, you could see that as relatively late Midrash or relatively early FanFic—take your pick.

OK. So today we’re going to do some Midrash/FanFic on two familiar Bible stories. The first is the story of the Prodigal Son—the story of the younger brother who takes his money and runs from home. There’s a sequel to that story in the Bible itself, namely the resentful older brother’s coming to complain to the father about his supposedly too-indulgent treatment of the younger brother.

But I want you to midrash-fanfic another, later sequel: What would a conversation between the younger son and the father be like say, some 15 or 20 years after all these things happened? Think about that as you listen to God’s Word, reading from the Luke’s Gospel, chapter 15 verses 11-24 . . .

Preface to Second Scripture Lesson:

Another familiar Bible story, also from Luke’s Gospel. It’s the story of the ten lepers, all of whom were healed by Jesus, but only one of whom came back to thank Jesus. Here’s the Midrash/FanFic question: What reasons would those nine give for NOT thanking Jesus. Listen now for God’s Word, Luke Chapter 17, verses 11-19 . . .

Sermon:

OK, so here's my Midrash/FanFic on the Prodigal Son story. I'd like to hear yours, too.

It's fifteen years later: a quiet, warm summer evening; dinner finished; the father and the younger son, alone, together. The younger son has a son of his own son now, a son who looks like—who seems to be growing up *just* like—*his* father. Which both amuses (“What goes around comes around, I guess.”) and worries his grandfather (“Oh, no, can we bear to go through all that again?”)

“Dad, there's something I've been wanting to say to you for a long time now.”

“Go, ahead son.”

A long pause. “Thank you.”

“Son, that's OK.”

“No dad, I mean it. When I think about all that you and mom have done for me—for us—and now that I have my own son . . . well, I know I wasn't always easy.”

His father interrupts him, holding up a hand. “You were always a good boy.”

Now it's the son's turn to be amused (“He will always be himself, won't he?”) and worried (“Is he starting to forget things?”). He looks at his father with a skeptical—“really, Dad?”—smile.

“No, son, listen to me: you have always been a good boy, and your mother and I have always—will always—love you.”

“OK, Dad, if you say so. Given everything you've done for me, who am I to argue? But Dad, . . . thank you . . .

“Thank you, son.”

I actually learned this from some of you. When we were standing next to each other, down in fellowship hall, looking down and swirling the coffee in our cups, and I was conveying my own anxiety about my own relationship with my children, many of you told me of your adult children expressing their gratitude, saying thank you, to you, many years later. “But it takes time, Richard, it takes time, and you can't count on it—and in the meantime, you have to love them no matter what.”

That was good advice, kindly intended, and it helped. Thank you.

OK, so here's my Midrash/FanFic on the reasons—the excuses—of the nine lepers who didn't say thank you. Again, I'd be interested in yours:

Ex-Leper#1: “I meant to—I wanted to—I thought about it—a lot—a lot, really! Believe me, I really did!!!”

Ex-Leper#2: “You have to understand: It's been a difficult time for me. I mean, at first, the chief priests didn't believe me. And then my own family didn't even recognize me. And when my father did, he nearly dropped dead, but I'm not sure my brothers were so glad to see me. And I was just so busy—trying to put my life back together again—re-acclimation, transition, call it what you will—I really had to get used to being healthy again, to eating regular meals, to people NOT being horrified by me. It's been a difficult time . . .”

Ex-Leper#3: “I will, I will. I promise. Soon. Real soon. I even bought thank-you cards and stamps—just haven't found the time to write. A couple more days, maybe a week, a couple weeks at most.”

Ex-Leper#4: “After all this time, I'd be embarrassed to go back to him now. What would I say?— I mean he does this healing stuff a lot—what if he didn't remember me, would I say “Hi, I was the fourth leper from the right,”? That just seems weird.”

Ex-Leper#5: “OH! I forgot!”

I could go on; I could give excuses for all nine—believe me, I could give ninety-nine excuses for all nine—without

even breaking a sweat. And I didn't need to thank anyone else for them, either: they're all up there right now, spinning around on the excuse/guilt hamster wheel of my own mind.

So gratitude and its expression can be a rare and beautiful thing. But if you think the Bible story makes it a little too rare, if you think that only one out of ten lepers saying thank you seems a little too pessimistic. Well . . .

Some years back, I was talking on the phone to my father, and he told me that my high school Latin teacher was retiring after 35 years of teaching.

"You ought to drop him a note," my father said.

"OK, Dad, when I get some time."

"Oh, boy," I thought as I hung up, "Dad's really having a tough time adjusting to *his* retirement. Poor Mom!"

The next time we talked on the phone, he asked me if I had sent the note.

"No, Dad, but I will, I will. I promise. Soon. Real soon"

So I decided—for Dad's sake and because he'd probably ask me again *next* phone call—I would. But once I started writing . . . well, I got into it a little (I know, I know: Big surprise!). I started to tell him how, after all these years, I could still recite all the verb and noun paradigms—along with the songs and rhymes he had put them to. And all the stories from ancient history! "Carthage must be destroyed," Pliny the Elder would say at the end of every one of his speeches in the Roman Senate—no matter the topic. "*Future passive participle used to show necessity!*"

I told him how *his* teaching schticks—especially his dramatic renditions—would suddenly, unexpectedly, just come out of my mouth while *I* was teaching; how in particular, when I was losing the class in my very first large lecture in ancient philosophy, his rendition of the priests and priestesses at the Delphic oracle—how they went into a trance and God's pronouncements just came right out their mouths,—just came right out of my mouth, and I had the class back again.

He wrote me back. Said that of course he remembered me; remarked on the joys of teaching; told me about his retirement plans. And then in the last paragraph, he thanked me, saying that mine was the only letter, the only note of any kind, he had received from a former student.

I couldn't believe it. I mean he was a great teacher! He taught extra sections of Latin 1 every year! The cool kids, the popular kids—the jocks, for goodness' sake—joined the Latin Club!! (One out of ten may be too optimistic.)

And please don't think that I'm making myself out to be the hero, the tenth, good, grateful leper; remember I wouldn't have done it if my father hadn't told me to—twice; and I still have that excuse-guilt hamster wheel spinning—squeaking—away in my head.

But as rare and as beautiful as gratitude and its expression are, it's even more important to recognize that God's grace—God's loving us, God's blessing us—does not depend on our feeling, or on our expressing, gratitude.

Even if that younger son had never, ever, said thank you or gotten anywhere close to it, his father would have still gone right on loving him. The whole tone and tenor of the story makes that clear. Even if *none* of the ex-lepers had come back to say thank you to Jesus, Jesus would have still gone right on healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, preaching good news to the poor, and bringing God's love to the world. The whole tone and tenor of the Gospels makes that clear. God's grace does not depend on our gratitude.

God is God, and grace is grace—God gives it, and by definition we don't deserve it, just as the younger son doesn't deserve his father's mercy, much less the party; just as none of the lepers deserves to be healed. God is good: God's life, God's light, God's love, God's goodness, God's blessings are everflowing and ever over-flowing. To us and for us. Our goodness or lack thereof, our gratitude or lack thereof, doesn't affect that one bit.

But our gratitude still matters; it's still a good thing. Anytime we are given something, especially something important, something that we really need—help of any kind, guidance, friendship, forgiveness, health, goodness, life, love—gratitude is the right response.

It's the right response, because in gratitude, we acknowledge that we are in need of God's grace, and that God is the ultimate giver of grace. In other words, we begin to know ourselves and God, as we really are and as God really is. Even more than that, we become conduits of that grace. God's grace will flow where and to whom it will, but when we are grateful, God's everflowing and ever overflowing grace flows through us. And in that, there is joy.

I can put it simply: if someone does a good turn for me, the right response, the beautiful response, is not only to say thank-you to the giver, but to pass it along to others, to do a good turn for someone else. One good turn deserves another; or in more contemporary parlance, pay it forward.

In fact, in more than a couple parables, Jesus condemns, in no uncertain terms, those who don't pass it on to others, who don't pay it forward, who receive grace and try to keep it all to themselves. They will not only not get grace, Jesus says, they will get well . . . "in that outer darkness, there will be much wailing and gnashing of teeth, so my Heavenly Father will do to every one of you, unless . . ." Make of that what you will, but know this much: Jesus is serious about this.

And that is why, in my little piece of FanFic on the prodigal son story, the father thanks his son for thanking him. NOT because the father needs his son's thanks. But because the father wants what is best for the son, and being grateful, being both a recipient and conduit of grace in gratitude, is what best for the son. And the father, more than anything else, wants what is best for his child.

And that's also why, when the tenth leper comes back, praising God in a loud voice, and throwing himself at Jesus' feet to say thank you—that's why Jesus says to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well." That tenth leper is now both a recipient and a conduit of God's grace. He is more God-aware and more self-aware. And in that gratitude there is joy. His faith has made him well.

And remember that this tenth ex-leper was a Samaritan, one of *those* foreigners, one of *those people* that nobody wanted around. By calling attention to this fact, by saying "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Jesus is reminding his listeners and us that God's everflowing and ever-overflowing grace, also flows to the outsider, the foreigner, those people nobody wants around. And he's reminding us that we must be conduits of grace to them as well.

In fact, if you'll allow me a little more Midrash/FanFic: Jesus' reminder might be especially pertinent for us today, if, among such foreigners, children—young children—are being taken away from their parents, to who knows where for who knows how long, as a supposed deterrent to crime, and if the chief law enforcement official of our country is quoting the Bible to justify this practice. In such circumstances, Jesus reminds us, we must be conduits of grace to the foreigner as well. He's serious about this. That's what the Bible says.

Father's Day—and Mother's Day, for that matter—can be hard. Many of us feel that we did not thank our fathers or mothers as we ought to have. I know I do. And many of us feel there are many other people and many other occasions when we have not felt and expressed gratitude as we ought. I know I do. But we need to get over that—this is really about God and not us. And besides, it's not too late. Not too late for us to become conduits of God's grace. Not too late to say thank you to someone, and always to God. Not too late, to pay forward the grace we have been given. And when we do, we are connected to everyone—past, present, and future—including the foreigners who are with us now, and including those who are no longer with us, who are now full recipients of God's grace eternally. When we do pay that grace forward, we know joy; we share in God's life. In ordinary time, in grace and in gratitude, God is with us.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.