

Lent 4 3-14-10 St. Luke's EG 8 & 10 (kids)

We are ambassadors for Christ God making his appeal through us!

In the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent, sometimes referred to as Refreshment Sunday. We are halfway through the 40 days, set aside by the church for our own self-examination and repentance, in order to prepare ourselves to celebrate again the great Paschal Feast at Easter.

Today is a moment in liturgical time when we are invited to ease our Lenten disciplines and refresh ourselves through feasting and resting.

We are reminded once again that we are saved **not by our own efforts**, but by that mysterious **grace of God** that we come to know and trust in the Christian journey.

And what is the story before us in the Gospel to lift up this truth but probably one of the most favorite and famous of all Jesus' parables: **The Prodigal Son**...or you might say the Jealous older son...or you might say, the Parable of the Loving Father.

Three different takes on the bottom line, which is a reminder to us of the incredible love and grace of God that comes to us **FIRST**, before anything we might do to merit that, what is called in theological lingo: **“prevenient grace.”**

I can never read or hear this parable without remembering a moment in time in our family life soon after we came to RI back in the early 90's.

Our older son, Rob, was home from his first job down in Virginia on spring holiday. He had his new car, his first since graduating college and getting a job. His younger brother, JP, was just learning to drive, also home on vacation from school, and out with his mother on errands driving his older brother's car, just for the joy of it. (Can you tell where this is going?)

Out on Post Rd down in NK there's a bad crossing between the Bank on one side and the Ice Cream Factory on the other.

Trying to get across the road from the bank and scoot into the road that leads to our neighborhood is tricky under the best of circumstances. Well, you guessed it, JP and another car collided to the tune of what turned out to be \$3,000 worth of grill and front bumper of that shiny new black GEO Prism, vintage '93!

They called us at home from the car place just down the road to apprise us of the accident and they were on their way home. We were pretty appalled.

However, as JP and mom turned in the driveway, I observed a holy moment I'll never forget. JP got out of the car to come up the front walk to face the music of his older brother and you never saw more down in the dumps body language.

But what I saw from the front window was **Rob** walking **down** the path toward JP and embracing him who was by now dissolved in tears of repentance and remorse.

As I witnessed that embrace of compassion, understanding and no doubt pounds of empathy for one in such a situation, despite his own disappointment over the damaged car, I suddenly saw the Father of the Parable of the Prodigal son embracing that boy who came home repentant after squandering his whole inheritance on "loose living"!

The Father goes out to meet his lost son approaching and before that son **even has a chance to confess his sins** and throw himself on the father's mercy, the father embraces **him**.

We know the story of how he calls for a huge celebration killing the fatted cow, putting a ring on his finger and a robe around him and calling for all his friends to party....what incredibly extravagant grace and generosity of spirit and soul!

Is there any **more powerful** force in our knowledge and experience of God than that, until of course we come across a similar kind of experience in our own lives to bring that reality utterly alive to us?

This is what is meant by the "PREVENIENT GRACE" of God: it comes **BEFORE** anything we can do to deserve it. It is overwhelming and doesn't make common sense; it is even maybe a little counterintuitive, not to

mention counter cultural in our kind of world, at least on the surface of things.

Scratching beneath the surface, however, we experience episodes like the one on our front walk 17 years ago that stays imprinted on a father's mind forever.

Practicing Random acts of kindness and....(what was that bumper sticker also long ago?) In our current day we are so aware of **lack** of kindness in public discourse that such examples when it does happen are necessary to be shared.

Like back on New Years Day when I was stranded with a dead battery in front of the Stop and Shop and some young man unknown to me simply stopped, offered to jump start my aging battery (since replaced), and said when I offered to pay him: "NO, just help somebody else out sometime!"

Oh my goodness, what a way to start the new year. This is the life of God already present out in the world which we must BLESS and be thankful for, and share in more and more. St. Paul says in the epistle for today **"We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through US!"**

Reggie McNeil at our diocesan Convocation a few weeks ago called on us all to be the church out in the world, to be "church" wherever we go and wherever we are. Make "church" a verb as some in our midst say about Christ!! Make Christ a verb by how we live and move and have our being wherever we go...to be the salt and light to the world as Dee Tavolaro said in her Charities Witness as Jeff read it from this pulpit last Sunday!

What is God's mission in the world but to bring about reconciliation? And we are called to be partners with God to accomplish it.

And the good news is that, though this is hard to do alone and by ourselves, we don't have to when we depend on the kind of grace and forgiveness, love and compassion demonstrated in the parables of Jesus, the Prodigal Son being one of the best examples.

On this Refreshment Sunday we are reminded of God's prevenient grace (he comes to us FIRST) making possible our repentance and the things we have to do to bring about reconciliation we couldn't possibly do on our own.

