

“...with calf and robe and ring...”*

By Jon Rondestvedt '61

Today is Sunday, the 18th of March, 2007, and the Fourth Sunday in Lent. The Gospel for this Sunday, coming from the 15th Chapter of Luke, features the prodigal son. It is a familiar parable and one that has influenced our language as well as our art, including stained glass windows both at Chartres and Bourges. But this all-so-familiar narrative has also affected my belief system.

As a young man sitting in Trinity Lutheran—a rural, white clapboard sided church—I heard this parable a number of times. With each new hearing my animosity grew. Who did the younger brother think he was? Demanding his share of the inheritance? Too big for his britches, that’s for sure. But then upon his return—more audacity! You would think he wouldn’t dare show his face. What’s with the father, anyway? I’d be mad, too, if I had never received such royal treatment. These thoughts and more defined my perceptions, perceptions probably shared by a majority of worshippers sitting in the pews around me. But time with its inevitable aging coupled with fatherhood with all of its vicissitudes have reshaped my focus. I no longer dwell on the young man who demands “...the portion of goods that falleth to me...” and who subsequently “...wasted his substance with riotous living.” Nor do I wallow in the righteous indignation of the aggrieved elder brother. Rather, I am taken by the father whose extravagance of grace and mercy is reported in Luke 15:20—“But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.”

Now the father could well have responded to his son’s homecoming in a manner familiar to us all. In both our private and public lives wrongdoings, sleights, injustices and the like are taken in, catalogued, digested and, finally, fuel responses that separate, engender conflicts, as well as those that nourish fruitless anger and unrelenting bitterness. The father of the parable, however, chose a different set of responses, superior responses, I believe, in which grace, mercy and, ultimately, forgiveness are at the core.

My firm belief in the superiority of grace, mercy, and forgiveness is no doubt attributable in part to my upbringing as a Lutheran and a Christian. But it can also be said to have been molded by exposure to events in which these qualities were altogether absent (the maiming and slaughter in Darfur; the centuries-old sectarian violence in the Near and Middle East; the purges in Russia) as well as those in which these selfsame qualities were present (an Amish grandfather who aids the wife of his granddaughter’s killer; a grieving mother who asks a judge to show leniency in the sentencing of a young driver whose carelessness took her child’s life; aging veterans of WW II who meet on a battlefield and embrace as brothers). Both lists could be expanded, of course, the earlier endlessly. Sadly.

Shakespeare’s plays are a rich treasure trove in which humankind is offered up at its worst and at its best. As a teacher of the humanities I routinely assigned Shakespeare’s

King Lear as the final reading of the first semester. In this play an aging king sets a test before his three daughters in which each is asked to profess which one loves him most. Goneril and Regan, the elder two, express their love in profuse terms. Cordelia, the youngest, however, refuses to echo her sisters' fraudulent words. White hot, Lear disowns Cordelia and sends her away, dividing his kingdom between Goneril and Regan. In subsequent action, the elder daughters reveal their true natures. Lear is stripped of all vestiges of power and, in an act of unspeakable cruelty, the elder sisters send him into a "wild night" where "...the bleak winds/Do sorely ruffle." Attended only by his Fool in a "night which [which] pities neither wise men nor fools...", Lear disintegrates into madness.

As the play draws to a close, Cordelia launches a campaign to both wrest the kingdom from the control of her sisters and restore her father to his rightful position. Both she and Lear, however, are captured and sentenced to death. While awaiting their fate, Cordelia succeeds in restoring much of her father's mental well being. In one of the most poignant moments in all of Shakespeare, Lear and a tearful Cordelia—father and loving daughter—stand face to face. Free of his former arrogance and with growing lucidity Lear speaks with uncharacteristic sweetness:

“Be your tears wet? Yes, faith, I pray weep not.
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me, for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:
You have some cause, they have not.”

Then in words remarkably free of all anger and of all rancor, Cordelia's response of but four words embodies the meaning of grace, mercy, and forgiveness offered unconditionally:

“No cause. No cause.”

What I believe... Setting aside our baser instincts, we humans can effect a better world **IF** we choose to more closely emulate Cordelia and the prodigal's father. Let our words be, therefore, “No cause.” Then let our actions find us rushing forward with “...calf and robe and ring...”

*words from the close of verse 2 of hymn “Our Father, We Have Wandered”

P.S. It is interesting to note that at both Chartres and Bourges the number of stained glass segments depicting the prodigal's “riotous living” are significantly more than those given over to his homecoming and restoration. But not surprising, is it.....