

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' All the tax collectors and sinners. This is the lesson the lectionary dishes up on the week after I needed to file my annual sales tax report! You see, in my part-time piano business, I collect sales tax. I am a 'tax collector' for the state. And without a doubt a sinner, too. Mind you, the tax collectors in that long-ago Palestinian province of the Roman Empire were notoriously dishonest and greedy, and were hated by the Jewish community for their collaboration with the occupying forces. They were a visible and detested presence. Sinners, too, were remarkably visible, because the religious and moral laws were so specific. The Ten Commandments, which we read in the Lenten penitential order, were just a summary; the hundreds of laws actually on the religious books were very explicit and precise. Jesus knew who the sinners were, everyone did. Yet, he took the time to sit at table with them, and share meals, and listen to their tales. He did not tell them to go away first and make an appropriate sacrifice or do some other reparation for their misdeeds. He met them where they were. He always seemed to care more about what was in their hearts than what was in their reputation. Lord, incline our hearts to keep this law.

Jesus knew what many had forgotten: that the laws of the scriptures were given as a gift, not as a punishment. God passed the laws to Moses not to hamper the lives of the people, but rather that they should flourish. Following the laws would lead them to peace and prosperity, keep their hearts in the right place, and ultimately reconcile them with God and with one another. It is apparent, at least in the Biblical record, that this sense of gift had been replaced by a sense of obligation. The idea that one might grow and be nurtured by the laws had been replaced by a dread of punishment if one might break them. They were seen less as a path to maturity than a minefield of regulations. Jesus knew that, like any good parent, God had given the gift of the law for the betterment of his children, and Jesus knew his ministry was not to banish the law, but to fulfill its dream.

1956 was turning out to be a pretty good year for me. I was seven years old, had had a really successful academic year in second grade, and was moving on up into third with a lot of confidence. I had a couple of close friends, and a loving family. We lived next door to my dotting grandparents, on a new street cut through the farmlands outside Liverpool, where new post-war houses were being built on vacant lots, and road-graders were leveling the ground nearby for the new NYS Thruway. It was an idyllic and comfortable life. I even had a new puppy. But I was anxious to be more. I wanted to be taller, more popular, wealthier, more respected by my peers. I guess nothing ever really changes...I was significantly disappointed in myself. My mother, father, grandmother and grandfather each tried hard to encourage me. But I was just so dissatisfied with myself. Think of it: I just couldn't learn to swim; I just couldn't climb trees as well as the other kids in the neighborhood; I couldn't figure out how to catch a ball, and was even cut from the T-shirt baseball team which was coached by my friend's father; my piano lessons were not going very well; and in that summer of '56 I struggled and struggled to catch up with the other kids and learn how to ride my little bicycle. My father took off my training wheels, and one day, after countless falls and humiliation, as the kids from the neighborhood watched, I was finally able to make it down our sloping street without crashing, and even pedaled a couple of times.

But things went sour that November. Not long after my eighth birthday, my grandfather Henry, my mother's father who lived next door, died during the night. It was both a shock and a disaster. Henry was a dominant personality, larger than life, and his presence had always colored our world. He was a self-made man and a perfectionist, whom many found objectionable, and had been during his life a teacher, shopkeeper, surveyor, and justice of the peace. And he fiercely loved his wife and family. Especially me, his first grandchild. His gruff and impatient personality scared me, and my father BTW, but underneath that practiced façade, he had a sympathetic heart of gold, which few saw and even fewer expected. His death turned our world upside down, and it seemed to me that we, especially my grandmother and mother, floundered for a good long while. That was in November. A month later, when Christmas morning came, I discovered that my grandfather had, some weeks before he died, bought me a full-sized bicycle as a special gift, as if from the grave he was continuing to say, "I know you can do it...now I challenge you to be the best you can be!" As my grandmother wheeled it out of its hiding place in their spare bedroom, everyone but me was sobbing uncontrollably.

And this wasn't just some Sears catalogue bike. My grandfather had purchased it from the widow down the street. Her son had gone into the military after high school, and my Christmas present had been his pride and joy. I never met him, but knew him by reputation. He had been a little older than the other kids, very athletic and popular, and a sort of legend in the neighborhood. This bicycle had its own reputation, too, as the classiest one in town. It was the Cadillac of bikes. It had lights, a horn, mudflaps with reflectors, a chrome rack over the rear fender, rear-view mirrors, multi-colored streamers flowing from its handlebar grips, whitewall tires, and even battery powered rear turn

signals operated by a switch on the handlebars. All the bells and whistles. And now it was all mine. All winter long, I caressed it in the garage, dreaming of the proud impression I would make come springtime. I was, truth to tell, a bit concerned that it was just too much bike for me, but tried my best to put those old training wheels out of my mind and think positive.

And eventually spring did come, and I wheeled my new steed out onto the street, to the envy of all the kids, especially the teenagers who remembered it as the best bike in town. In time, I learned to ride it with some degree of confidence and care, but my mother, for whom it was a constant reminder of her late father's generosity and thoughtfulness, watched with concern. It was decided that I should only ride it on the neighborhood streets, not on the busy village highways. That trimmed the feathers of my wings a little, but I agreed, in principle. Now, by riding only on side-streets, it was possible to make it all the way into the village of Liverpool, and I had walked those streets many times, and had worked-out a route, a kind of maze, which would permit me to accomplish that trip. But there was one stretch which was problematic: there was a home along Myers Rd. with a mean dog, one who was unchained and barked viscously at passersby. And this beast would also chase both cars and bicycles, anything with wheels. I dreaded that stretch. But there was a way to avoid it, one which I had often used on foot. If one left the road, and went down a hill through the woods, one could connect with another street which would then lead to my house. It was more of a cliff, really.

So one day that spring, as I awkwardly rode my new, big, glorious bike down Myers Rd., I had this vision, a delusional vision, that I could just leave the roadway, hold on tight, and soar down that hill on two wheels with competence and agility. I convinced myself that, despite the danger, that daredevil act would make me proud of myself, raise my self-esteem, and be a wonderful story to tell the other kids. I had miscalculated. And, as I went over the edge, I realized it. Like the younger son in our gospel story, I had clearly bitten off more than I could chew. Luckily, I didn't hit one of the several trees on my way to the bottom of the ravine, but at some point I became separated from the bike and came to a rest some several feet away from it, with bruises and a twisted ankle. There was, as I recall, a little blood, too. But the poor bicycle had suffered a severe trauma. It was no longer the Cadillac it had been. As I limped home, wheeling it as best I could, I was filled with guilt. I had nearly destroyed this iconic reminder of my beloved grandfather, had nearly squandered his memory and returned home emptyhanded. I tried and tried to invent a story which would characterize my foolhardiness as an accident, but in the end, I told the truth. My parents and grandmother were naturally upset, but, like the prodigal son, I was greeted with relief that I hadn't been completely lost to my injuries, and was forgiven for my childish ways.

They cried at my foolishness. As I expect God weeps at our disregard for the great gifts we have been given. As Jesus probably wept at hearing the confessions of those sinners and tax collectors long ago. Yet he sat with them at table and listened to their tales. And perhaps he often told them this story of the two brothers, one an embarrassed child with a guilty conscience, the other an unforgiving self-centered child, but both with a father who not only forgives but loves. This father, in the parable, loves both his sons. Just as God has provided a loving covenant with everyone, this father has built an estate with which to nourish and protect his beloved children. And when one of the sons leaves for a distant country, leaves his home to revel in a different kind of life than what the father has planned, the father constantly surveys the horizon for any sign that his wayward child might return, looking faithfully and longingly down that dusty road. And when the elder son whines that he has not been amply appreciated for all his orthodox correctness, grumbling like a Pharisee that his brother ought to be firmly discredited for his prodigal sinfulness, the father begs him to join the celebration of life. The sinner and the Pharisee. God the Father loves them both.

Lent, as you know, is a time of self-reflection which ought to lead us to confess those things we have done, and those we have left undone. For these weeks, we move our confession liturgy to the beginning of the Sunday service. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. We are imperfect. We are flawed. And sometimes we are idiots. But we are beloved of God, and when, whether driven by conscience or circumstance, we return to God's covenant, to God's care, to God's Kingdom, expecting only a servant's wage and a set of work clothes. God welcomes us not as a servant, but as an honored child upon whom the best robe is placed. Waiting for us is not the yoke of slavery and the barefoot toil of a slave, but the ring of an honored child and sandals to bless our feet. Our inheritance is God's everliving compassion. God, says the Psalmist, does not want us to be like the Horse or Mule. God's law, God's expectation for us, is not like a bit or bridle meant to keep us on the straight and narrow, but is a loving gift meant to turn our hearts, and Jesus is the fulfillment of that gift. Jesus invites us all to God's great celebration, but Lord, have mercy, and incline our hearts not to refuse this gift as would self-righteous Pharisees, but to receive this gift as restored disciples Amen.