

Tenderness, Compassion and Justice

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A few weeks ago, I discovered a work of art online. I don't remember the artist or anything about it other than it portrayed one of the most famous of Jesus' stories, the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11–32). I didn't bookmark the site, so I haven't been able to find it again.

In these days when fewer and fewer people know anything at all about the Bible, let me remind you of this wonderful story.

It's a story about a son who's grown tired of working on the farm. He asks for his share of his father's inheritance. The father gives it to him, and the boy leaves the farm to live it up in the bright lights of the big city. Not surprisingly, as he flashes the cash, he gathers a group of hangers-on who love to help him spend it. When the money's gone, so are the "friends," and the son ends up slopping the pig pens. For a Jew, there is nothing more demeaning. He has sunk as low as he possibly can.

Finally, he comes to his senses. He decides to go home, throw himself on his father's mercy, and offer to work at the farm for nothing. Even that would be better than the depths to which he has sunk.

Meanwhile, back home, the father has been waiting for his son to come home. Every day, he walks to the gate and peers down the road. Imagine his joy when he sees his son—sorry, bedraggled, smelling like a pig—coming down the road. He runs to greet the son he thought was dead, throws his arms around him, draws him close, bathes him, and throws a party! It's an amazing story of love and compassion, grace, and forgiveness.

In the painting I saw, the son kneels at his father's feet. It's the traditional pose for this parable in almost every work of art. The striking thing in this painting was the look of exquisite tenderness on the father's face.

"Tenderness" is a word not often heard in our culture. In fact, the spirit of meanness seems to be growing in our society. It happens in political discourse—just listen to the Conservative party's leadership contest or the Republicans in the USA.

It's not just politics. It's happening in our lives as we witness mass shootings in schools and malls and on downtown streets. We hear of hate attacks on synagogues and mosques and Sikh temples. We see the effects of the hyper-partisan language of politicians as their minions take to the streets in protest marches and convoys, their spittle flying as reporters interview them.

Tenderness seems to have become an outmoded concept in today's world.

You would almost expect the father to kick the returning son in the backside and send him packing. But the father's tenderness in the parable is more than mere sentimentality. The father displays his compassionate love for his son in strong actions. He shows compassion and grace. He actively forgives his son, even though he had squandered his fortune. He restores the son to the family through acceptance, hospitality, and forgiveness. Tenderness opens the door to mercy; these actions heal a broken family; we discover an unexpected justice in this story, marked by healing and restoration.

Psalms 85: 10 pictures the day when "steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, when righteousness and peace will kiss each other." This is the essence of justice—not that we seek vengeance, or payback, but that in compassion and tenderness, we seek reconciliation above all else.

In 1980, Pope John Paul 2 asked, "Is Justice Enough?" His answer was no. "In the name of an alleged justice (for example, historical justice or class justice) the neighbour is sometimes

destroyed, killed, deprived of liberty, or stripped of fundamental human rights. The experience of the past and of our own time demonstrates that justice alone is not enough, that it can even lead to the negation and destruction of itself, if that deeper power, which is love, is not allowed to shape human life in its various dimensions.”

A just society is built on both compassion and justice. If we find it within ourselves to exercise that level of compassion, then we will be able to shine a light into the gloom, and not just escalate the heat of partisan passions.

This is part of the elusive message of Christianity: that tenderness is the root of justice. Jesus taught us that “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.” (Matthew 5:7)