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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Lent 4
March 27, 2022

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today's gospel reading is that most familiar of bible stories called the Prodigal Son.

And this story is a powerful story about redemption.

And redemption is a religious term which means to recover and to rescue, to set free and to deliver from sin.

Now, the story of the Prodigal Son is about a wayward young man.

A young man who squanders his father's wealth in dissolute living.

A young man who descends into the pit of despair.

But this young man then finds his way back from his squalid life.

He returns to his father. And his father embraces his lost son, and in fact throws a celebration for this once wayward son.

This is a story of redemption. The son has been recovered. He has been rescued. He has been freed from his former, shameful life. He has been delivered from sin.

But there is more to this story than just this one son.

The parable begins by saying that "There was a man who had two sons."

So what of this other son?

Well, that other son is the one who has been faithfully obedient to his father.

He has served his father all his years, and yet this son has never been given the opportunity to celebrate with his friends.

And so this story of the Prodigal Son ends without a sense of resolution, at least with resolution regarding this second son.

Did the second son go and celebrate with his father and his brother?

Or did the second son stew in his anger and frustration?

We don't really know.

"There was a man who had two sons." We know the resolution of the first son. But we don't know the resolution of the second son.

And, many of Jesus' parables end in just this way, they end leaving us wondering.

It is almost as if there is to be another act in the play. But the act is left unwritten.

Of course, this may very well have been Jesus' intention.

Jesus may very well have left this parable unresolved, because we are to supply the "next act."

In other words, Jesus may want us to see ourselves as the second son in the story, and so then Jesus is asking us, "How will you respond to the redemption of others, the celebration of others?"

More specifically, how will we respond to God "unfairness," God's grace towards those who we might feel deserve no grace from God?

What if God were to show grace and redemption to those we would rather see get their comeuppance?

What if God were to show grace and redemption to those we loathe?

What if God were to show grace and redemption to those who are our deepest enemies?

What if God... How would we respond?

That is the question in this gospel reading. That is the challenge in this story of the Prodigal Son.

What will the "next act" look like, when we ourselves are the players in that next act?

How will respond to God's grace bestowed upon all people, even people we would rather not see receive God's grace?

PAUSE

Lately, I have been thinking a lot about this notion of the “next act.”

You see, last weekend my son played the lead in the musical at his school.

His high school performed the musical *The Phantom of the Opera*, and my son was cast as the Phantom.

Some members of our church attended the performance. Our own Hope Bowling even played the cello in the pit orchestra.

For those of us who may not know, *The Phantom of the Opera* is also a story about redemption. And if you bear with me, I will try to describe the story succinctly.

Now, the Phantom is described as a prodigy. He is a great scholar, a musician, an architect.

But from birth he has suffered from a disease that has terribly disfigured his face.

As a child he was caged and put on display as a freak of nature as part of a travelling circus. He was scorned and abhorred by all who saw him.

And he was in this circus, that is until he was secretly released and brought to live in the bowels of an opera house unbeknownst to anyone.

The boy then grows up to become a man who has never known compassion or love, and who has lived only in solitude.

And it is there in the opera that he discovers a beautiful young singer, named Christine, whom he takes under his teaching and empowers her so that her voice just radiates with amazing song.

But the truth is that the Phantom is more or less haunting Christine in her dreams, and overpowering his subconscious with his dark presence.

And so while the Phantom is tutoring Christine and propelling Christine’s singer career forward in the opera house, and while he is also falling secretly in love with her...while all this is going on, a former love interest of Christine’s comes on the scene, named Raoul.

And after so many years apart, Christine and Raoul fall in love and become engaged.

But the Phantom observes all this, and he feels betrayed and rejected by Christine for all that he has done to help her career.

Now this Phantom has risen to murder already on two occasions, that the audience knows, if not in fact more. So we know what the Phantom is capable of.

And then the story culminates in the Phantom kidnapping Christine and taking her into his lair in the bowels of the opera house, which for all practical purposes is the epitome of hell.

Raoul then comes in an attempt to rescue Christine.

But the Phantom discovers Raoul and quickly captures him, and ties a noose around his head, threatening to hang him.

And the Phantom then makes Christine decide...either agree to be with him, the Phantom, and live with his disfigured face and with his dark and unloved soul for the rest of her life, or she can choose her lover Raoul, at which point the Phantom is sure to kill him.

And Christine then wrestles with her choice, and she pauses, turns and kisses the Phantom, but she is still tormented by pity for the Phantom and love for Raoul.

And, while she is still kissing the Phantom, he pushes her away.

He pushes away and he walks away from her and stands there staring at Christine in her tormented state, and he looks at her lover struggling there is the noose for air, for life.

And the Phantom goes over to Raoul, and he severs the rope and frees him, and Raoul and Christine run away out of that pit of hell, and the Phantom collapses in tears and sorrow.

The Phantom despite his condemnation and misery due to his deformity, the Phantom because of a kiss from a beautiful young woman, the Phantom is able to show mercy, and to free his love that she might be happy with Raoul.

And in this, the Phantom comes to know the grace and redemption of God.

And the story ends with the members of opera company and the authorities coming into the Phantom's lair to destroy him for the murders he has committed.

But when they arrive, the Phantom has already vanished from them.

And that is how the musical ends.

But we as the audience are left wondering. What happened to the Phantom? What became of him after his redemption? What became of him after God's show him his grace?

What about the "next act"? But the "next act" isn't so much about the Phantom.

The "next act" is more about how people, how we, would respond to one who has been shown grace and redemption, even though that one in our minds may not necessarily deserve grace and redemption, after all the Phantom had committed multiple murders and manipulated and kidnapped Christine and had threatened to kill Rauol, and had terrorized the opera company.

How should people respond? What kind of compassion and love should be shown to the Phantom?

Certainly, the authorities and the members of the opera company were out for his blood by the end of the musical.

So what about the "next act"?

Well, I don't know if it was the intention of the Andrew Lloyd-Webber, the creator the musical, I don't know if it was always his intention for the cast of the musical to meet and greet the audience whenever a performance concluded.

I don't know if that was Andrew Lloyd-Webber's intention.

Regardless, after the musical performances at my son's high school that is exactly what happened.

The cast remained in costumed and gathered in the high school gym across from the exit doors of the auditorium, where then people could go and congratulate the performers.

And for me, it was the "next act." And I was curious about how would people would respond? How would they greet my son, still in costume? How would they greet this young man who had played a murderer, kidnapper, terrorist, etc., and who might be seen as undeserving of God's grace and redemption?

And as powerful as the musical *The Phantom of the Opera* is, the meet and greet was just as powerful.

For you see, people came up to my son and hugged him and embraced him with eyes full of tears.

And children, who looked quite unsure about this tall young man still in a mask, who still looked rather unsettling in appearance, children still came up to him to see him.

And my son would kneel down to be at their level, and he would smile at them, and these kids would just put their small arms around him and hug him.

And, when asked by persons greeting him if he would be willing to remove his mask so they could see the makeup of his deformed face, he would do so, and people would see the full effect of the deformity. Some would even reach out and touch his face.

And it was as though by touching his face, or hugging his person, or crying on his shoulder...it was as though these many persons, these many strangers in most cases, were responding to the character of the Phantom, as much as if they were responding to the actor who is my son.

What I witnessed was a powerful healing moment for many people as they needed to respond to the Phantom in the story.

They were responding to the human being that was the Phantom, that unloved, cruel and murderous person, who had received God's grace and redemption.

It was the beautiful "next act" in the musical.

PAUSE

How do we respond to persons who we don't necessarily think are deserving of God's grace and redemption?

How do we respond? Are we like the second son in the story of the Prodigal Son in our gospel reading today?

Do we begrudge the fact that anyone who is so wasteful, sinful, and immoral in their lives...

Do we begrudge the fact that such a person should be looked kindly upon by our Father? Do we begrudge such a person and write them off?

Or, do we behave like those who are brought to tears, and those who need to touch the wounds of another, and those who need to embrace the unloved person, like the Phantom, which was demonstrated in that meet and greet?

PAUSE

Now, I can't help but tell you how much of a proud papa I was of my son, but it wasn't just because he did such a great job in playing the Phantom in the musical.

But, it was also how he made himself available for those in that meet and greet.

He could have played it "cool". He could have played it "aloof." He could have stay in character and have played the Phantom as one that was still unsure about people and how they would treat him.

But instead, he gave them a Phantom in that meet and greet that was now human and lovable.

I don't think he realizes the powerful part he played for so many in that meet and greet, in that "next act."

He was just being his friendly self. But he taught me and he taught many about how we should respond to persons whom we would rather turn away from.

PAUSE

So, Friends, I encourage to watch *The Phantom of the Opera* sometime, get the musical out from your library, because its message is powerful, and it resonates well with the story of the Prodigal Son.

God teaches us that we are to respond with fervent love toward all people, even those, and maybe most especially those, whom we feel are undeserving of God's grace and redemption.

For that is the "next act"—in which we go out into the world and respond in kind to all persons, and in this way we ourselves will experience God's healing. Thanks be to God. Amen.