My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord God of our Lenten repentant Hearts, Minds, Spirits, and Souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

We’re in our fourth week of Lent this Sunday, and it’s been quite a month of March in terms of what we’re learning. What have we talked about these last three weeks? Of course we remember, but just in case, let’s review. We spent some time talking about how we go about things alone and how that might not work out, that God is needed to help us figure things out. We talked about the value of community and how we needed others to help us figure out answers to life’s challenges and mysteries, that God was good but not sufficient to right all wrongs. And last week we talked about how there are just some things that we cannot figure out at all, why bad things happen to good people and how this is not God’s or anyone’s fault, but it’s why our lives are better prepared for ups and downs when we have both God in around our hearts and the heart of God around us (that means the church).

Luke tells us right away that Jesus is, once again, sitting down with folks typically shunned by the teachers and powers-that-be; the Pharisees and scribes grumble, says our text. The mere fact that the tax collectors were collaborating with a brutal Rome only leads interpreters to claim this as an instance of radical grace. And at the end, the scene becomes a simple contest between law and gospel. In our Bible, what side usually prevails when comparing the law and gospel? Right. Gospel will win.

We have heard this story of compassion and victory before. And perhaps the customary readings of this scene are exactly what is needed. But I spent some time with my friend Richard Swanson recently, and I’d like to share with you some of our thinking and discussion. It might just make us think a little bit deeper about this and all of Jesus’ parables.

It's interesting to notice that we usually think that the son has totally hit rock bottom and repented his life choices. But that’s not exactly what happened. It says he “came to his senses .” Now, maybe he did experience a life-changing realization that remade him completely.

Maybe. But it could also merely imply that he did the math. And he probably realized on his current trajectory he was going to crash and burn in a short time.

Our Gospel writer also seems to ignore the son’s moral state. Luke tells us that the son says that his father’s hired servants have “bread enough and to spare”, all the while the son is starving. So we talked about what that means, and a more workable translation of the original writings might instead say this: the son says that the hired servants not only have enough bread, they have too much. That difference matters.

If it were translated that way, the son not only contrasts himself with the father’s hired servants. And he remembers his status. Maybe he judges that it is not right that they should have more than he, as a beloved son, has.

If he had made a contrast with his brother, the flavor would be different. In that case the contrast would be between his location and his brother’s, between his choices and his brother’s, and one might expect him to return home and try to live more like a son and less like a leech. The fact that he contrasts his situation with that of servants (who are glad just to have a job) suggests that he believes his status entitles him to more food. Does this sound like life-changing repentance?

Let’s also look at the younger son’s speech that he has carefully rehearsed. That *could* imply that he has learned his lesson, and that he is, in fact, ready to surrender his status and sense of entitlement. But maybe it’s not.

In seminary we read a fellow named Donald Juel who suggested this scene recognized what older siblings have sometimes learned about younger siblings: they have the advantage of waiting, watching, and learning how to manipulate their parents. Maybe the younger son knows that the father, who gladly agreed to go along with the legal fiction that the younger son was dead so that he could inherit the death benefit, would melt at the suggestion that he treat him now as a servant. The younger son knows that Dad will treat him as a beloved son, even when the outcomes are pretty negative.

Notice that it is only when the younger son plans what he’ll say to his father that he evinces a willingness to surrender his status. When the younger son is speaking to himself, he doesn’t seem to be at rock-bottom repentance, having lost all that matters. He cruelly notices that the father’s servants have more food than they should rightly have, given their status. It’s the heart which reveals, not the tongue. The younger son’s inside voice reveals his heart, and maybe it’s a dark one.

What if these oddities are the key to the story? If they are true, then this well-loved scene is not a bland endorsement of hospitality or welcome, but recognition of the real risks that go with actual grace.

It even raises the question of whether grace is such a good idea after all. Deep in our hearts we commit to the notion that grace is a radical, creative force that remakes even the deepest corruption. All of us have found comfort in that notion many times in our lives.

But this strange little scene requires us to stop and wonder, requires us to notice that the father, who says that his dead son is now alive, has been wrong before.

We don’t know how all this ends. If the young son is a selfish manipulator, what will he do in the future? Is the son re-made, or just re-shoed, restored, and rested for his next caper? Inquiring minds want to know.

I’ll leave us with these final thoughts.

If these interpretations are key, maybe we shouldn’t think about the success of this story, but about the risk with which it ends. Perhaps only grace could redeem the young son. But as we touched on last week with the story of our troubled teen, it’s also clear that we don’t know that he is redeemed. Compassionate parents, eternally and overly optimistic, have been wrong before.

Perhaps this strange scene shines its brightest light, on the unrepentantly real risks of life together. Just like we learned last week, welcoming strangers, the very act of hospitality, can end with a knife between the ribs. And it’s no one’s fault. It just does.

If we pretend that such things never happen, people who prefer fear and anger as motivators will win the argument every time, and faithfulness will be left looking like a sentimental artifact of a charming childhood.

Perhaps the point is that the risks are as real as the love. And then the point is that the love cannot be defeated or denied. Perhaps. And undefeated, undenied, undeserved, and abundantly shared love might indeed re-create this troubled world. We should tremble when reading this story. But we should also give thanks to God who awaits us, however we approach.

Thanks be to God, Amen.