

I want to recap what we have learned about God in the 15th chapter of Luke
The whole thing started because the Pharisees were upset with Jesus for his welcome to sinners
They accused Jesus, and rightly so, of eating with tax collectors and sinners—he did!
Jesus answers their accusation with 3 parables—lost sheep, lost coin, lost sons
Jesus/God is the shepherd, woman, Father
We are the lost sheep, lost coin, lost sons

God pursues us because God loves us and takes pride in not losing us—looks until he finds us
Huge celebration when the lost is found—full of joy!
We saw that repentance, which Jesus named, was simply letting ourselves be found

The third parable of the lost sons—is Jesus' defining parable about who God is and how God acts
God lets us go when we are determined to go—grants us freedom
But lets us go without judgment and in a way that leaves way open to return
Even if we don't recognize the grace and freedom or see that we can ever return
God endures the agony of rejected love
Instead of hurt and anger, God responds in grace
God releases us, but God also waits for us to return—even anticipates our return
Father sees the son coming and intercepts him before he gets to the village and other people
God welcomes us home! God extends love and compassion
God offers the same welcome, love and compassion to the older brother—the insider who stayed home
God responds in unconditional love even when publicly shamed by the older brother
Then there is this huge celebration of the Father's love and welcome—of God and God's love for us

What is missing in this chapter? God's judgment!
We see it in the Pharisees—the village people—the older brother—others
But it is absolutely missing in the Father—it is even missing in the repentance
There are places where we expect the father to judge and yet, he does not
Yet it is what we expect from God—that we will be judged for our failures

First we struggle with the God of the Old Testament and the violence and judgment we see there
But we are people of the New Covenant and the New Testament
A loving God is present in the Old Testament—but it is also a story of the people's journey
We see the ups and downs of a people who struggled to follow God
We see their understanding of who God is—their expectation that God will judge
But we also see the tenderness of God calling them back to God's ways
Ultimately God responds to the people who broke his covenant
The covenant that said you will be my people and I will be your God
He gave them a new covenant...

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. Jeremiah 31:31-34 NRSV

In the New Testament, Jesus answers the question about what is most important...

He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Matthew 22:37-40 NRSV

If we can get past the Old Testament God—we then struggle with the sense of purity and holiness

God is loving—but God is also holy and desires that we are holy, perfect as God is perfect

Bad theology says that God can't look on sin so when we are sinners, we are condemned

Somehow God reaches across to rescue us from sin—comes all the way to us

But then we must struggle to be worthy of God's grace—be perfect

We feel that we must reach up to God and be worthy of the high calling

So once we come to God—many of us see God as judgmental

But listen to this definition of holiness by Philip Gulley and James Mulholland in "If Grace Is True"

"Holiness is God's ability to confront evil without being defiled. God's holiness does not require him to keep evil at arm's length. God's holiness enables Him to take the wicked in His arms and transform them. God is never in danger of being defiled. No evil can alter His love, for His gracious character is beyond corruption. This is what it means to say God is holy—God's love is incorruptible.

Holiness and love are not competing commitments. God is love. His love endures forever. This enduring love is what makes God holy. No manner of evil done to us or by us can separate us from this love. God transforms His morally imperfect children through the power of His perfect love. It is our experience of this love that inspires us to such perfection.

Jesus said, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt. 5:48). If this verse was a command for moral perfection, our cause is hopeless. Fortunately, this admonition follows a command to 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matt. 5:44). Perfection is demonstrated not by moral purity, but by extravagant love. We are like God not when we are pure, but when we are loving and gracious." (If Grace is True, pp. 73-74)

God never comes in wrath—God always comes in love!

God is just! - This is another place we struggle because we want to see justice done

A friend was teaching kids and reached in her bag and gave one kid a candy bar

The rest wanted one—but she said no, she just was giving it to this one

Why? No reason

Her point—life is not fair—some get the goodies and others don't

True!

But we want justice—for those that do wrong receive their just and due consequences

We get an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth

But Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof is right...

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth just leaves the world blind and toothless."

I heard a man speak on NPR whose son was killed in Iraq

When questioned about justice and if the opposition shouldn't pay for killing his son

He said no—I must forgive them and move on—otherwise the killing cycle perpetuates

God chose grace over wrath—a grace that redeems and allows us to begin again with a fresh start

In this is forgiveness and reconciliation

Grace is the bedrock of the Kingdom of God

The alternative to our understanding of justice...

"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you..." Luke 6:27-28 NRSV

We are to overflow with love, goodness, blessing, and prayer

These achieve what justice cannot—God's new heaven and new earth

Again, from "If Grace is True"...

I believe, as with holiness, we've misunderstood justice. Justice is the end, rather than the means. It is the result of God's gracious kingdom, not the tool to bring it about. It is making all things just as they were intended to be. Working for justice means eliminating the causes of pain, not increasing them. In feeding the hungry, healing the sick, encouraging the oppressed, and challenging the oppressor, Jesus asked us to sow goodness, not multiply misery.

We are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation, modeling God's passion for seeing animosity ended and injury forgiven. Justice may equalize rights and pains, but only grace can transform hearts."

As Quakers we believe that we can enact heaven on earth

We do that through love and reconciliation

Retribution and revenge cannot change things and are incapable of creating the Kingdom of God

They are the weakest form of power—a failure to persuade and attract change

Love and grace are the only power great enough to transform and truly change the world

From "If Grace is True"...

God is love. Holiness and justice are not competing commitments. God has not chosen to turn his back on us or to punish us as our sins deserve. God has chosen to redeem us. Nothing requires God to condemn us, so God has not. Rather, in his sovereign freedom, he waits patiently for the day of our redemption."

And so ends Luke 15—the father waiting for the redemption of everyone—

The younger son who squandered everything in the far country

The older son who stayed home—yet rejected his father and publicly shamed him

All are offered redemption and love

No one is judged

It is simply an invitation to come home to the Kingdom of God

An invitation to dwell in intimacy with the Father, just like Jesus did