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Dear Friends,

This letter, like this month, spans two seasons, and so is presented in two parts. If you find yourself thinking about taking a break at the end of the first section, that might be a good idea. At the end I think you may find that the two sections come together, but there is enough in each to stand by itself.

Later this month—in the third week of February—we will mark the end of the season of Epiphany with our annual Shrove Tuesday pancake supper which concludes with the burning of last year's palms to make the ashes which we use for Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, which is the day following.

I.

Why all these seasons with funny names? “Epiphany,” the season from January 6 until Shrove Tuesday (February 17 this year), takes its name from the Greek word which means something like “showing forth.” It starts with the recollection of the visit of the Three Kings, the first instance of Jesus being recognized by the larger community as being of special significance. The Gospel stories throughout this season, taken mostly from Mark, each tell a brief story which shines a particular light on an aspect of Jesus’ character and identity. The first of these stories tells of his baptism and the voice from above at the end which declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:11) And the Gospel for the last Sunday of the season, February 15 this year, recounts the time when Jesus’ closest disciples followed him up to a mountaintop and literally saw him in a new light. This story, called The Transfiguration because Jesus seems suffused with intense, glistening, radiantly bright light, concludes with an echo of the end of the baptism: “Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ (Mark 9:7)”

So as you make your way through the last few weeks of Epiphany, I invite you to think about what constitute your own “data points” about Jesus. Consider the stories or quotes which stick with you—maybe from childhood—what makes them memorable for you?

Really, get serious what is it about The Prodigal Son or The Good Samaritan which makes them so powerful? Neither story has a particularly easy point. In the first, we are challenged to forgive

and accept back people who have scorned us and led lives of irresponsible self-indulgence; in the second, we are challenged to offer aid—to total strangers—entirely on the basis of need. If one were to put these stories into simple exhortations or commands, shorn of their narrative details, I doubt if many would take them very seriously. And yet these two parables are among the most remembered, best known, and perhaps even best loved of the tales associated with Jesus.¹

I wonder if the basis of the appeal of each of these stories is almost subliminal. In our conscious minds I suspect that we tend to think of ourselves as the ones on whom a duty is laid—we are to be like the forgiving father or the helpful Samaritan. We are to “go and do likewise.” These are stories that tell us how we ought to behave.

Who do you think you are? But I wonder if on the deeper, and maybe less conscious level, we identify with the ones who have exhausted their resources and whose only hope is the mercy and generosity of others. The world, in both parables, is a place where mercy—more than justice—predominates and produces the happy result.

We like to believe in popular romances that love—and in this instance we usually mean something like romantic love—conquers all obstacles. Differences in class, education, political views, family histories, ethnic identities, and so on all fall before the overpowering love of the couple for each other. The popularity of these stories, from *Cinderella* through *Pride and Prejudice* and into the extensive catalogue of Hollywood RomComs, suggests that we long for a world in which the barriers we experience in actual life could be washed away.

So also in the two parables, we want to believe that mercy is there in the last resort, no matter how much we may have messed up our own lives or how much we have been beaten up by others. And in each instance, mercy creates a new order, providing something like absolution—the washing away of the consequences of the earlier sins and creating the possibility of new and harmonious life ahead.

I think the popularity of The Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan, two stories now entering their third millennia of circulation, derives not so much from our desire to be instructed as from our deep longing for a world in which mercy triumphs over the consequences of sin. And the sin suffered and the mercy offered are neither supernatural nor unknown to ordinary experience. These are not tales of the lame suddenly made whole or the blind given their sight in an instant, but acts of generosity and courage which are well within the reach of normal, ordinary people.

Perhaps some of the epiphanies, the “showing forths” or the “manifestations” of this season, might be about us. As this is a time when we learn more clearly about the identity of Jesus, perhaps we might also look more deeply into ourselves. This may be a season in which we are more aware of our deep desire for mercy—in our own lives and in the world in general—and become correspondingly more cognizant of our ability to offer mercy and so become active partners in the creation of that manner of life for which we long.

II.

An acquired taste Lent, the season which follows immediately after Epiphany, may be an acquired taste. In its full meaning and potential, Lent may be a season which makes more sense to those of certain years whose experience and observation have made them perhaps more skeptical about our

¹ Both of these parables, by the way, are from, and unique to, Luke’s Gospel which will provide the bulk of our Gospel stories a year from now.

ability to fix ourselves and our world on our own. Lent is a season of humility, a time set aside to offer us the healing opportunity to come face to face with the gap between what we wish were true—about ourselves and the world—and what mature reflection invites us to acknowledge.

Some of the richest and most pragmatic parts of our liturgies address how we fall short of our ideals. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. Rather than squabbling over whether we actually did or did not do them, rather than trying to deny, explain away, justify, or defend, we simply confess.

Repent or repeat? For confession is a much more mature, practical, and straightforward way to be honest about the past and to seek a different outcome in the future. After confession, we have two choices: we can simply plow ahead (some variation of “OK, so I did it. So what?”) or we can repent—not only acknowledge that we were wrong, but set about to be different as we go forward. “Repent” literally means something like “turn around,” but I would settle most of the time for simply “change direction.” If we do not repent, we repeat. To produce a different outcome, we need actually to acknowledge that what we did was wrong.

The next stage after repentance is change, or, as the Prayer Book sometimes says, “amendment of life.” Regret may be necessary, but it is not sufficient. And I wonder if the phrase might be more colloquially understood to mean something like “amendment of lifestyle”—that is to say, an alteration of the whole combination of choices, behaviors, and attitudes which led to the behavior we have acknowledged to be problematic. Let your repentance be systemic—rather than view behavior in isolation, consider how they fit into, or come out of, other parts of your life. Perhaps the acknowledged sin is a symptom of something which might merit greater attention. Of the things you have done in the last week which you regret, consider where they came from. If you are sitting in church before the service begins, this reflection, especially in the season of Lent, might be a profitable way to prepare for the liturgy.

Long and boring And at St. Elizabeth’s Lent, like Advent, begins with The Great Litany sung in procession at the 10:00 am service on the first Sunday of the season. The Great Litany is famous, at least locally, for being long and boring. It is, of course, a litany, a list beginning with a fairly cursory review of ways in which we mess up—blindness of heart, pride, sinful affections, false doctrine, and that sort of thing—followed by an even longer catalogue of misfortunes—some of them fatal—which can come our way: earthquake, fire, flood, plague, pestilence, dying suddenly and unprepared, and so on. And if you think the Litany’s list is quaint and old-fashioned, compare it to a week of the front page of *The New York Times* and see how many references are common to both.

The Litany continues with a series of requests that we might be assisted in our spiritual, intellectual, political, natural, and family lives. And it concludes with a series of petitions that God might strengthen our hearts so that we might bear what we must, withstand what we can, and change for the better what is within our power.

Viewed as a comprehensive engagement with what troubles us and how we might be aided in confronting those things, the Litany is a powerful, poetic, insightful, and even beautiful piece of liturgy.

Could slower be better? And I think the Litany’s slow pace is an asset, not a problem. By its very nature the Litany challenges us to look at why we find spending ten minutes to consider these matters annoying. The Litany is a reminder that not everything can be fixed quickly, that not every affliction can be reduced to a problem to be solved, that the evil in the world is sometimes of our own doing—conscious or otherwise—but sometimes completely external to us. Viewing everything

as our fault or nothing as our fault are both false positions, as are the contentions that every problem has a solution or that nothing can ever be really fixed. The Litany is an invitation into honest engagement with complexity, with human potential and its limits, and with the asymmetrical nature of our relationship with God: we are creatures and dependents, not partners.

The Litany begins—and ends—requesting mercy from God. That request is a frequent element of our liturgies, often in English, “Lord, have mercy upon us,” or in its original Greek form, “Kyrie, eleison.” That request is the first thing and the last that we say in the Litany. When one charged with an offense “throws himself on the mercy of the court,” it means he is pleading guilty, not making a defense.

In our liturgies we do not come to justify ourselves; our hope for healing, for restoration, and for what we need for our lives to be brought back into order is mercy, the same attribute that Jesus presented so powerfully in the parables of The Prodigal Son and The Good Samaritan. The Great Litany takes that theme and expands upon it, giving specifics to the general principle.

Show us your mercy But what does mercy from God look like in ordinary life? I suspect that we rarely feel as though we were in some surreal courtroom on trial for our lives. This image as applied to the Last Judgment, though powerful for much of the Christian tradition, seems less compelling in our age. That is not to say it is less likely, but just that we would like to think it so. In a more immediate sense, believing that God does, indeed, view us with mercy in his (or her) heart may make it easier for us to acknowledge where and how we have gone astray, setting in motion the sequence of confession, repentance, and amendment of life of which I wrote above. How might we feel, how might we behave, if we were to hear in our hearts what Jesus heard at his baptism, the voice of God declaring, “You are my beloved.” Not, “you are perfect,” certainly not “you have never done wrong,” nor even, “you have never disappointed me,” but, “you are my beloved.”

We do better in every dimension and direction if we seek mercy from God rather than we assert that, though it might come as a relief to others, we ourselves really do not need it. As we say (well, most of the time, chant) in Morning Prayer: “O Lord, show thy mercy upon us; And grant us thy salvation.” Perhaps recognizing that it is God’s deepest desire to bestow mercy is the beginning of living a life in which we genuinely feel we have been saved. Tedious though it may be to dwell on this, nevertheless, it is worth noting that salvation is for those who realize they are in trouble. Those who think they do not have, nor ever will have, the need for anything beyond what they themselves can provide, may skip over all this talk of mercy, salvation, and saviors without a second thought. But before making that decision, reviewing the list in the Litany of what life—or, for that matter, death—can throw at us might be a useful exercise.

A final thought—for now—about the Litany. Behind the critique that the Litany is boring is the expectation that liturgy is meant to be entertaining. Exercises for the dancer, scales for the pianist, and laps for the swimmer are boring. But they are necessary. Behind the whole concept of exercises is that, on our own just sitting around, we are not good enough to be who we want to be. We have to work to be better, and while it is good if that work can have its own rewards, its actual purpose is its result more than its process. Thinking about, rather than doing, exercises, just acknowledging that they are a good thing and leaving it at that, or not doing them because they are boring are all ways to fail.

And prominent among our goals in Lent is to deal with, not perpetuate, failure. So as we approach the third week of this month, I invite you to look forward to The Great Litany as a valuable resource for recalibrating our understanding of the nature of our lives, our sense of self, and our sense of our place in the world. In that work we will be thinking about sin, repentance, amendment of life,

mercy, restoration, and a new way to live. I hope you will avail yourself of this rich opportunity to address these deep and vital issues, issues which, I suspect, no other institution, setting, or context will consider in such depth and with so many opportunities for engagement and with such promise of blessing.

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