

COMPETITION AND GRACE

Genesis 4: 1-15; 2 Corinthians 12: 1-10

I got a call one day from the director of a nursing home near the church. I did monthly services there and she knew me. She was particularly concerned about a resident. The one son this woman had in her life and one she trusted, had just swindled her of all her savings and had taken off, nowhere to be found. The nursing home administrator was helping her get her finances sorted out so she could continue to live at the home with her basic needs met. But the director was particularly concerned for her inner state of being. The woman was hurt and devastated. She was all alone now. She had no one. She refused to eat or do anything. She just wanted to die.

Wow! This was awful! What could I do, a stranger she had never met? Did she even have a religious background, or was I just another charlatan selling cheap hopes in the face of her deep pain and hurt?

I walked over to the home and I was taken in and introduced to the woman. She was sitting all bent over. I didn't know what to say as I felt anything I said could not get to the depth of pain I was beholding. Anyhow, I cannot remember how it all happened, but somehow she began to talk. She told me a story, a story of a beautiful and courageous love, but also a story of heartbreak.

The woman was originally from Quebec. She grew up at a time when Protestant and Catholic Christians didn't mix and certainly didn't become friends. And yet, she met the love of her life and he was a Catholic. Neither her family nor his approved. But they kept seeing each other and their love for one another only grew. Eventually they got engaged, secretly. When her family found out, they threatened her. If she didn't break off the relationship, she would be disowned. "But isn't it about love?" she said. Sure it's about love, she was told. But there are some boundaries love must never cross.

Her fiancé was experiencing the very same response from his family. But they loved each other and would never give each other up. They decided to do what they had no other choice but do. They ran away together. Their families, true to their threats, disowned them. They left the province and moved to Ontario. They would build their own life together, in a new place where no one knew their backgrounds.

The early years were happy years. Their love for one another continued to grow strong. They had a child together, and then a second child soon after. Both were boys. As the boys grew, they, like many brothers, had a rivalry with one another. They were always competing against each other. Sometimes it got nasty and tears were shed. But the parents trusted that love heals all and eventually they would be close.

But this is not what happened. As the brothers grew, so did their competitiveness and animosity. They were also different. The one brother, the older one, was always trying to do more and better. It was as if he was trying to prove himself and earn his parents love. He felt that his younger brother was the favoured one. He got away with anything and their parents always gave him whatever he wanted. Eventually the older brother left home, and try as they could, the parents lost touch with him until he was never heard from again. Was he still alive? What had they done wrong that he was so resentful and bitter toward them? They had tried to love him the best they could. Why did he hate them and his younger brother so?

And what about the younger one? He didn't seem to care his older brother was gone. Now he was the singular focus of his parents attention and he liked it. He never seemed to finish anything he started in school and he never held onto a job. He was happy living at home and was constantly asking his parents for money. He was becoming a worry and a burden. His parents were hard working. Why had that not rubbed off on him? Did he even care about them or were they just a bank account?

Eventually, the woman's husband got cancer. After several years of tender loving care, it was clear he was dying. The woman had to beg her son for some support. He seemed distant and indifferent, even when he sat with his father at his bedside. Eventually her husband died and the one person in the woman's life whose love was vivid and real was gone. She continued to live with her son, but eventually she needed the kind of supportive care that she couldn't manage at home. She went into a nursing home. Her son was the inheritor of the house and his parent's savings. In her vulnerability, she gave him access to all of it.

Her son would visit her, but it would always end up coming to the topic of money. He needed money for this and for that and it was endless. At one point she found out he had sold the house and was living in an apartment somewhere. And then, a little while later the bank called her. Her accounts had been cleaned out. They wanted her to know and assumed she and her son had talked about it all. No, they hadn't. She tried to contact her son. The phone number was no longer in service. Where was he? What had happened to all the money? Radio silence. Months had passed. The nursing home told

her that there were monthly costs that were no longer being covered through her bank. This is when she broke down. She didn't know what to do. Thankfully, the nursing home were committed to finding a solution for the financial situation. But what about her heart? What about her pain, her hurt and the betrayal?

Before I say any more about what happened next, let's bring in some of the revelatory wisdom of our scriptures. In our reading from Genesis, we have the story of two brothers: Cain and Abel. Their parents: Adam and Eve, seem to have done everything for them. But for some reason, Cain in particular, sees his brother as a competitor. A competitor for what? Is it God's approval or God's blessing? This is the way the story is told. But like all stories in the Old Testament – God and God's actions are often projections of internal states of being within the humans involved. By telling stories that seem mythical, the scriptures are opening up revelatory wisdom aiming straight for the heart and soul. Somehow, Cain feels his brother is always winning out over him.

Is it a question of how their parents have treated them? Why is Cain feeling so threatened and so resentful? Well, he is given some word from God spoken into his conscience – “Why are you angry Cain, and why are you feeling so low? If you do well will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, evil is around the corner waiting to trap you into thoughts and actions you will regret.” Clearly, Cain is feeling his sacrifice was not as pure and from the heart as his brother's. Maybe, he gave of himself grudgingly, out of duty and not with a pure and grateful heart.

But sadly, rather than learn from his brother's example and purify his heart, Cain's solution is to get rid of him. If Abel is no longer around, there will no longer be any competition. Cain will be the only one to be loved and approved. And sadly, this is what happens all too often in our world too. Competition can be a beautiful thing if it brings out the best in us. But too often when we compare ourselves and compete with others it's always about winning or losing, being better or being bested. And even if we're feeling on top, it's hard to stay on top. Our hearts are never satisfied for long if at all. And too often, we can never be enough. Others will only love us if we are winners. Anything less deserves rejection. And even though we always hope this is not the case, too often we are taught to fear this to be the case. Even if those close to us promise to love us and cherish our worth no matter what, we are made to feel profoundly insecure and on the edge, knowing our value and worth is measurable according to the competition...

But then, we have the words of the apostle Paul. Paul is also in an environment where he is in competition with other apostles. In this 2nd letter to the church in Corinth, Paul

is hurt because he feels he has to prove his worth. Reading between the lines, it seems that some of these other apostles that have come to Corinth have made claims against Paul, that he isn't a real apostle like Peter and others who actually walked and talked with the flesh and blood Jesus. Also, Paul refers to a "thorn in his flesh" which many scholars have speculated could be some physical impediment like a stutter or a physical presence that was not as impressive or charismatic as some of these other apostles.

So, how does Paul compete with them? Does he put down their qualities and point to others he has to prove himself? No. He does the opposite. In this final part of his letter, he tells them that he has experienced mystical revelations and a connection with God and Christ that are second to none. But none of this can be proved nor can it be explained. It's the kind of assurance and conviction that lives inside Paul and Paul alone. No, he says, if you want me to make a case for my credentials as an apostle and compete and brag about my gifts, I will do the opposite. I do have weaknesses, some of which are all too obvious. Maybe I'm not as eloquent or tall or charismatic or impressive or what have you. But my external weaknesses and deficiencies have made me strong in a whole other way. I have come to know the beautiful gift of being loved for who I am, just as I am, and it is this gift of love, abundant and free, this gift love I call Grace... this is what I have to share with you. In fact, if I have to compete, I will compete by accentuating my weaknesses so that whatever I can give and whatever I can accomplish comes straight from God and not from me. I am simply the channel and the weaker and more negligible I may seem, the more God's power of love shines through as the transforming agent. My ego is out the window. I cannot take any credit. It's not about me. I have been shown this abundant love as a gift, and so I share it with you as a gift.

Wow, Isn't this beautiful? In a world where we are constantly being measured and pushed into competing... In a world where we have to prove ourselves, earn what we get and deserve any praise or attention... to be given something for free, given it abundantly, and the most precious gift of all – genuine love... what a gift and the best gift of all! What else can compare or compete with genuine love? And imagine if we can internalize such love and share such love with others... the chains of competition, rivalry, the need to prove ourselves... they are broken. We live out of gratitude for gifts received and shared.

The woman I was visiting began to eat again... We arranged a small group of people from the church who would visit... She began receiving material from the church and followed the worship bulletin, sermons and prayers... We made her a member of the

congregation by resolution of session because she was not mobile enough to actually come to the church... eventually she did die... there was no family to take care of any funeral arrangements... Between the nursing home and the church, we took care of everything... We organized and held a funeral service... we got people to come and we had a reception afterwards... It was one of the most beautiful services I have ever been a part of... Why?... It was all about grace, the gift of love and nothing else... And the gift is even more powerfully a gift when we have nothing to give back but gratitude...

In a world of fierce competition, rivalry and comparison, may we as followers of Jesus, as children of grace, become true rebels like the apostle Paul... May we give what is free and freely given from our hearts, and may we be rich in reciprocating with gratitude.

Our hope and prayer for Catherine and Callum is that as they grow they become not so much great competitors but great givers of the best gift of all: love... for this is what our world needs more than anything... Amen.