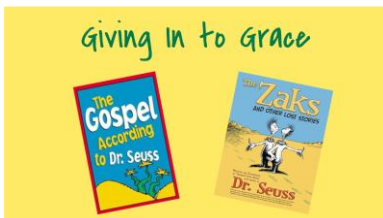


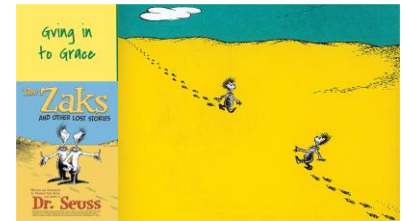
Luke 15:13-19

*<sup>13</sup> Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living. <sup>14</sup> When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands.”*

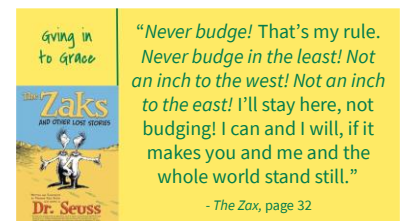


Our scripture reading for today comes from the beginning of the well-known parable of the prodigal son. The younger son’s decision to request his share of the family estate and to head out on his own was rooted in his youthful pride. This is a pride that we all have struggled with (or are struggling with) in our lives. We, like the younger son, once decided that we knew better than our parents or teachers or bosses and then decided to follow our own advice or wisdom. In this week’s Dr. Seuss book, *The Zax*, two characters are doing what they have been taught to do. They believe that what they have been taught is correct and is the only way, so they dig in their heels. This leads to an impasse. When they come to the impasse, neither is willing to budge. As we continue in the parable of the prodigal son, we encounter the older brother. His pride is at least as great as the younger brothers once was. Both our parable and our Dr. Seuss book end unresolved. This is hard. As we prepare to delve into the issue of pride today, let us pray...

In Dr. Seuss' imaginative world there are two kinds of Zaxes: the kind who go north and the kind who go south. While both Zaxes are capable of going either direction, as well as east or west, but their training has taught them to go north or to go south. So engrained is their training, so focused their thoughts, the Zaxes do not consider what they *could* do but focus only upon what they *should* do. One day the inevitable comes to pass. A North-going Zax is on a collision course with a South-going Zax. They are moving in exactly the opposite directions. Now, if these two Zaxes came face to face on a narrow path or on a one-lane bridge, then some tension would be understandable and maybe even expected.



At the point of impasse, either one could take a step left or right. Or both could decide to take a half-step sideways in opposite directions so that each, after a very subtle detour, could continue in his chosen direction. But no, that simply will not do. The issue has nothing to do with what is *possible*, with what *could* be done to solve the problem. The issue has to do with the pride of both Zaxes. One Zax shares with the other Zax what he learned in Going-South school: “*Never budge! That’s my rule. Never budge in the least! Not an inch to the west! Not an inch to the east! I’ll stay here, not budging! I can and I will, if it makes you and me and the whole world stand still.*”



When one Zax tells the other he will not budge for 59 days, the other tops it by proclaiming that he won't budge for 59 years. This story sounds absolutely absurd, does it not? Well, this is the reality for many relationships, and for much of our current politics. The issue facing the Zax has nothing to do with finding a solution. The only issue was pride. We are quick to recognize the foolishness of the Zax in this children's book.

This recognition brings up two important questions. First, do these fictional Zax represent people we know or can identify? Second, do they represent us or our church? At the core of the unwillingness to budge or to compromise is a lack of consideration for others and/or for the common good. We must consider, at what point do we allow pride or ideology to trump what our faith calls us to do and be in the world? We must decide when and how we find room to consider the other, or, as Jesus puts it, to love our neighbor. Sadly, when pride or ideology is what guides and shapes and forms who and what we are, the pride that rises up would rather self-destruct than change or accommodate.

Diving a little deeper into the two questions just posed, first, where have we or where do we encounter Zaxes in our lives and in our world? We do not have to look too far. Whether you are a Democrat or a Republican or something in between, we must acknowledge that politics have become extremely polarized in our nation. “You are either for us or you are the enemy” is what is heard in much of the rhetoric and what is seen in many of the actions taken by both parties. In wars around our world, we see several examples of two sides that are deeply dug in, each side firmly believing their ideology is the only correct ideology. In both cases, it often feels as if the world is standing still.

And diving even a little deeper, getting a little more personal, where are we or our churches acting like the Zaxes? This most often occurs when we are like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, judging others, allowing our anger over what they’ve done to prevent grace or mercy from even entering into our thought process. It also occurs when we dig in our heels over something we’ve been taught or over holding onto some tradition. We will always have trouble growing as individuals and as churches if we are unwilling to ponder change, unwilling to budge, unwilling to consider someone else’s thoughts and perspectives.



Dr. Seuss constructs his story of the Zax deliberately with both Zaxes standing on exactly even footing. Neither has any basis for claiming the moral high ground. Seldom in the real world do two opposing sides have equally valid views in any objective sense. But

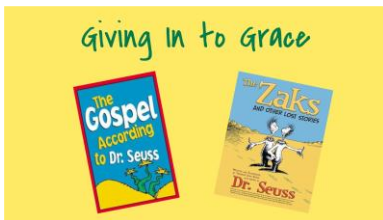
here is why this story is so relevant: in the real world, most disagreements are not objective. In most cases, on whatever level, most disagreements are subjective. The question of who is right or who is wrong depends on who is asking and who is answering the questions.

In our Dr. Seuss book, in our world, and in our lives, the sad truth is that if neither Zax is willing to budge, then both Zaxes will ultimately lose. The common sense or rational thing to do would be for both sides to agree to the recommendations of a wise and neutral third party. Such a rational approach usually does not work, though, because pride does not understand 'rational.' Here is where our faith becomes such an important factor in these situations. One of the key tenants of our faith – the call to love neighbor as self – demands more of us than simply digging in our heels and refusing to budge.

In almost all disagreements, there is tension. And tension requires two parties. Consider this tug of war analogy as an illustration. The 'game' begins as the rope becomes taut – each side pulling in an opposite direction. The only way to alleviate the tension is if one side stops pulling or if one side wins. Neither side is willing to relax the tension, because then they will lose. The shared fear of losing keeps both sides engaged in an activity that is not helping anyone. But if one person decides to lessen their pull just a little, and if someone on the other side notices, suddenly that can afford to give just a bit as well. One by one, bit by bit, the tension eases, the win-loss mantra fades, and the competition is ended.



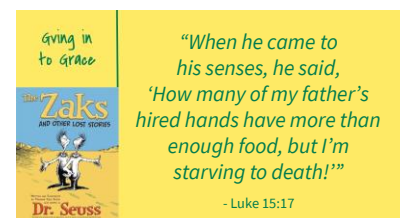
The same thing can happen in our faith and in our lives. In a disagreement, when one chooses to be the bigger person, it gives the other person the opportunity to be bigger as well. It is not guaranteed that the other will take the opportunity, so it does require a leap of faith. Or as one commentary put it, “It often means holstering your weapon while your opponent’s gun is pointed at you.” But as I said, ending a disagreement can only happen if someone decides they are willing to take a risk. This usually comes at the point where we decide that as much as we want to avoid losing, we want to stop fighting even more.



Please turn with me to Luke 15, beginning in verse 13. We begin mid-story. The younger son has already asked for and received his share of the family inheritance. In cultural terms, he was telling his

father that as far as he was concerned, his father is dead. In relational terms, he is telling his father that he is ready to be independent, that he does not need anyone, that he can make it in this world on his own. However, the world offers a harsh reality check. In verse 13 we read that in “*a land far away... he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.*” Finding himself starving while the pigs have plenty to eat, the young man realizes that life on the outside is not as breezy as he once thought it would be. Suddenly, maybe he realized that mom’s cooking wasn’t all that bad. In fact, it now seemed downright delicious. I can remember the day, as a late teenager, when I realized that my parents were a lot smarter than I gave them credit for. Perhaps you have had similar moments in your life.

In verse 17 we read, “*When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have more than enough food, but I’m starving to death!’*” What do you think? Was it 1, 2, 5, 12? How many times did the prodigal son think about going home before hitting rock bottom?



My guess would be ‘zero.’ The sad fact is that we often do not change, do not become willing to compromise, do not think about budging, until we have hit rock bottom. Only when we have tried everything we can think of, only when we have offered every bargaining prayer that we can, only then do we become willing to admit that we were wrong or that we might need to change. Until then, our Zax-like pride stops us, keeping us stuck. The grip of pride is so strong that as long as we have just a hint of choice or a bit of control left, we will not give in, we will not humble ourselves before God or before others. Only the absolute bottom – when there is nowhere else to go, no other choice to make – only then can we break the grip of pride and set ourselves on a different path.

It is at this point that the prodigal son decides to go to his father

and to say to him, *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and*

*against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as*

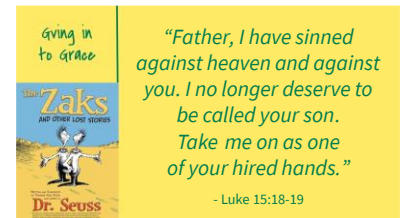
*one of your hired hands.”* But he does not need to say these words. He does not have to say

sorry or admit that he was wrong. His act of returning does that for him. The very fact that he

is home means that he has swallowed his pride. Sometimes we do not need to use words

either. Sometimes it is simply showing up or offering a hug or extending a hand that says all

that we need to say to begin the reconciliation process.



As we continue in the parable, we encounter the father’s grace. First, he sees the son from a

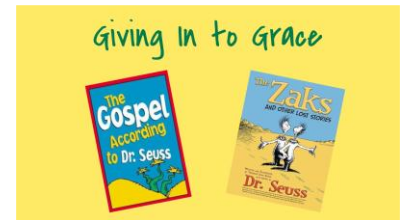
long way off and, *“moved with compassion,”* he runs to meet his prodigal son. He does not

punish the younger son or put him right to work. More importantly, he does not

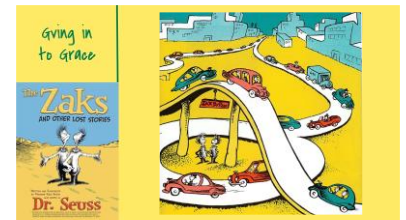
communicate “I told you so” either by his words or actions. Instead, ignoring these words of

his son, he hugs and kisses his son and then the father throws a party. What grace and love!

The party gets started. They are celebrating the return of the son that *“was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!”* Soon the older brother approaches this jubilant scene, coming home after another day of laboring in the fields for his father. Quickly understanding what has happened, in verse 28 we read, *“Then the older son was furious and didn’t want to enter in.”* The older son wanted to say, ‘I told you so... You were wrong.’ And in spite of his father’s best efforts at drawing him into the father’s deep grace, the older son refuses to go into the party. He refuses to give into grace. The parable ends with the older son standing outside – alone, furious, dug in. We cannot help but wonder, how long did the older son stand outside, refusing to go into the party, into his home?

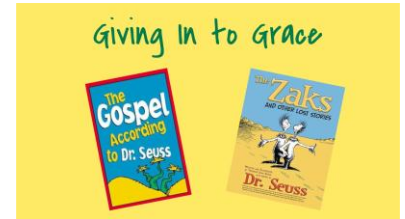


Returning to *The Zax*, a whole world gets built around the North-Going and South-Going Zaxes. A world of cars and buildings and bridges grows up all around the two Zaxes. The longer they have stood there, the less room they have had to move in any direction. Their hearts have grown harder and an end to their impasse is nowhere in sight. Some believe that this is the image of God and themselves, standing there facing one another, the person believing God is unwilling to budge. They do not understand that God is not a God who keeps score. These and others do not understand that God is like the father in the parable, eager to welcome them home, eager to celebrate that what was lost has now been found. The lost do not understand that our God is a God who will run out into the field to meet them and to welcome them with open arms, eager to give grace. Our question is this: how do we help them to understand that God is a God of mercy and grace, of forgiveness and reconciliation? How do we help the lost to understand that our God is a God who loves them unconditionally?





My friends, I believe that this understanding begins with giving in to grace. It begins with each of us modeling this kind of grace. And mercy and love and forgiveness too. Our big question comes down to this: Will we allow pride to stand in the way, or are we willing to take the risk that comes with reaching out, with extending a hand?



Now, maybe that reaching out, that risking, is something that you need to do in a personal relationship that you are in that is broken and needs grace. That risk, as we hinted at earlier, may call for us to admit that we were wrong or that we came up short or whatever. And that does open the door for those older brothers to say, 'I told you so.' But that other person may say, 'I was wrong too.' When we model this kind of love and grace and mercy and forgiveness in the ways that we live our lives and our faith, then we are modeling the love of God. It is a love that desires to heal all brokenness, to restore all things. It is my hope and prayer that this healing and restoration process is evident in all of our lives and in our church. And as Dr. Seuss would say, especially when the other option is to stand in the desert for 59 years, nose to nose with a Zax. May we ever be people of grace and forgiveness. Alleluia and amen.

### **GPS - Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. When has your willingness to consider another perspective or a different way of understanding led to growth in your faith or to healing in a relationship?
- 2) *Pray*. We often want to make excuses or to rationalize our prideful behaviors. Tempted to go there? Go there as a first option? Pray for God to bring you to a place of humility.
- 3) *Study*. Read Galatians 6:1-5. What do Paul's words here add to your understanding of living a life of grace, mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation?