

## **RELATIONSHIP AS A PRESUPPOSITION OF MERCY IN LUKE 15:25-32: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE TO RECONCILIATION**

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### **Abstract:**

Reconciliation is a process in conflict management, resolution and transformation. It sets the stage for the transformation of conflict and a post conflict coexistence. In societal confrontation with moral and political tensions that result from wrongdoing and conflict between persons or groups, reconciliation has variously been conceived of as an elusive concept. The questions often raised concern the possibility of genuine reconciliation between parties formerly at odds with one another and the ability of the victim to accept reconciliation with the aggressor. This work looks at reconciliation from a Christian perspective as an objective in the dynamics of mercy. This exercise of mercy is evident in the parable of the compassionate father in Luke 15. Using historical critical method in the study of Luke 15:25-32 the work reveals that the acknowledgement of an existing relationship between persons in situations of wrongdoings provides an enabling environment for the request for and granting of mercy. It recommends that emphasising, re-proposing, and improving on the relationship that existed prior to conflicts should constitute the

process of facilitating reconciliation in the resolution of conflicts among persons or groups.

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**Key Words:** Conflict, Mercy, Reconciliation, Relationship

**Introduction:**

The parable of Jesus recorded in Luke 15:11-32 is traditionally described as the parable of the prodigal son. From an exegetical point of view this work describes the pericope as the parable of the compassionate father. In the context of the prodigality of his younger son and the obduracy of his elder son, the father is depicted in the parable as being generous in his compassionate disposition towards the two sons. He shows mercy to his returning younger son and is understanding towards the angry elder son. In the context of conflict transformation his show of mercy to the younger son is consequent on the son's quest for reconciliation; a bottom-up process. His understanding towards the elder son depicts a top-bottom process. His activities in this situation of conflict therefore illustrate a model of reconciliation as a bottom-up and a top-bottom process. He is therefore depicted as a model in the facilitation of reconciliation in a peace building exercise. Mercy as a biblical term denotes the saving will of God who in his love reaches out to human beings to restore them when they go wrong. It entails the righteousness and fidelity of God. It is a disposition which is in turn required of humans by God towards each other (Matt 5:7; 18:33). Mercy among human beings constitute the basis for the ability to love a neighbour (Luke 10:32); it is the readiness to forgive and come to the help of people in need.

The central characteristic in the father's ready exercise of mercy and understanding consists essentially in his acknowledgment of the two persons as his sons (Luke 15: 27, 30-31); a model of a father-son relationship. The same reverence for a relationship informs the father's invitation of the servants to celebrate with him on the return of 'my son' (vv. 23-24) and his invitation of his elder son to celebrate because 'your brother' has come back to life (v. 31). The invitation directed at the servants is founded on their relationship with the returning son as a son of their master while the urgency to celebrate expected of the elder son is founded on his relationship to the returning son as his brother; a son of his father and therefore his brother. The parable therefore proposes the acknowledgment of a 'relationship' as a basis for showing compassion, requesting for mercy, granting of mercy and therefore facilitating reconciliation. It is the objective of this work to study the section of the dialogue, in the parable, between the father and the elder son in Luke 15:25-32 with a view to identifying the parable's acknowledgement of relationship as the basis for facilitating reconciliation.

This recognition of a pre-conflict existing relationship evident and underscored in the parable is proposed in this work as a Christian model for the facilitation of reconciliation in the process of peace building in the society. Relationship in this context denotes the state of being connected with one another; this can be by blood, marriage, race or nationality; it denotes a tie, bond, kinship, affinity, consanguinity or common lineage. It could be between families, friends and it could be work related. It often leads to interconnectedness in a society and in this interconnectedness, the most restricted relationship like the family type and its binding force is an active determinant. The human society is thus the product of a chain of relationships that begins

with the family and links every human person to a common patrimony. There is thus a central bond that holds all human beings together in a relationship beyond family, nation, continent, race, colour or religion. It is this relationship that can make for the exercise of compassion and the need to seek reconciliation.

The work begins first by exploring the meaning, concept and theories of reconciliation with a view to identifying the tensions that exist in the acceptance and rejection of reconciliation as an appropriate and constructive response to past conflicts. The interest is especially on the moral and political contexts in which victims of wrongdoings should accept reconciliation with their aggressors. It then explores the text of Luke 15:25-32 with a view to identifying the factor of relationship in the context of the parable's theme of wrong doing, regrets, forgiveness, anger, joy, mercy and compassion. It identifies the parable's emphasis on family ties in the request for mercy and in the exercise of compassion.

By way of conclusion the work elaborates on the link between relationship and conflicts and shows that while relationship predates conflict, conflict on the other hand represents friction in a relationship and seeks healing for a relationship. In the post conflict betterment of relationship through reconciliation conflict equally precedes relationship. When facilitators of reconciliation in conflict situations elaborate on existing ties or relationship between parties in conflict an avenue may be created for an appreciation of the need for reconciliation. It is precisely this proposal that is evident in the Lukan parable in 15:1-32. An acknowledgement of the existing family ties between the father and the son in the parable evoke compassion and expedite reconciliation between the two. This

need is thus proposed by the father to his elder son against the latter's rejection of his younger brother.

**NOTE:****In-text citations**

- In an author-date style, in-text citations usually require the name of the author(s) and the year of publication.
- A page number is included if you have a direct quote. When you paraphrase a passage, or refer to an idea contained in another work, providing a page number is not required, but is "encouraged", especially when you are referring to a long work and the page numbers might be useful to the reader. Example: (Jones, 2002)

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**Reconciliation: Meaning and Central Concepts:**

Reconciliation in the moral and political contexts borders on the betterment of relations among parties previously in conflict. It implies improving one's attitude towards a party with whom one is related. Such improvements or changes include one's notion of and expectations regarding the party; the ability to cooperate with, and participation in shared objectives, beliefs and practices. It works towards the elimination of negative emotions and attitudes and encourages coming to terms with what cannot be changed and the overcoming of resentment and anger towards the offending party. Reconciliation is not just a restoration of relationship to what it was prior to conflict, but creating an originally lacking good relation. It involves a reckoning with the past and a restructuring of the future; an improvement in a relationship that meets the norms that are believed to constitute such a relationship (Moellendorf, 2007, 210-211).

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It thus requires a certain degree of compromise; it calls for an acknowledgment of the situations and an acceptance of the other. Acceptance on the other hand, does not imply that all social relations are good. While in compromise, solutions regarding the issues in conflict are

sought, in reconciliation, the relationship between parties formerly in conflict is addressed for a genuine and optimistic implementation of agreed solutions. It implies that both the wrongdoers and the victims have adjustments to make and as argued by some theorists it is a top-down and bottom-up procedure which to be effective must always proceed simultaneously in both directions (Fischer 2011, 415). It requires the development of compassion by victims towards the perpetrators; a re-humanising of the perpetrators by the victims and the making of reparation on the part of the perpetrators; a restoration of the dignity and self-identity of the victims by the offending party. It is an occasion for the acknowledgement of one another through dialogue as unique individuals with worth and dignity and the re-establishment of an emotional connection. It is a required concept in academic literature on peace building and conflict transformation and is conceived by peace activist as a necessary requirement for lasting peace.

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The quest for reconciliation as a moral and political asset was re-awakened in the context of the 1995 post-Apartheid South Africa's attempt at bringing closure to the wounds and injustices of the Apartheid era (South Africa's National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34 of 1995). The prevalent challenges created by the conflicts of the 1990s which included the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the genocide in Rwanda brought to the critical mind the question of transitional justice (Radzik and Murphy 2015). They raised the questions of how post conflict societies amidst wrongdoings and injustices of their repressive past can justly create a stable and liberal order (Teitel 2002, 3). Theories of reconciliation have equally confronted the non-transitional challenges of reconciliation. They focus especially on the epistemic situations of injustices, hurts and suspicions which continue to characterize co-existence among groups living together in stable liberal orders like America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and even present day

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South Africa (Brooks 2004, Barkan and Karn 2006, Kymlicka and Bashir 2010). Do the blacks in America really feel accepted and are they able to adequately put behind them the hurts of years of slavery and victimization? Are the aborigines in America, Australia, Canada and New Zealand at peace with the status quo in their land, and do they feel completely compensated by the descendants of the perpetrators, for the loss of their heritage? In the sphere of morality, theories have equally arisen regarding the relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness. Can there be reconciliation without forgiveness or forgiveness without reconciliation and does reconciliation imply forgetfulness? (Verdeja 2009, 7-12, 19, Murphy 2015, 663-668).

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Reconciliation is both a process and an outcome; as an outcome, it is an after-wrong doing or post conflict improvement in relations; a healing of relationship. As a process, it is complex and multileveled; it seeks in the context of existing pains and bad feelings due to past conflicts and injustices to restore mutual trust and acceptance. It seeks to move a society from a divided past of adversarial and antagonistic relation of conflict to a more respect-based relation of shared future (Bloomfield, Barnes & Huyse 2003, 12). It anticipates this cooperation through the search for truth, justice, forgiveness and healing among others. It has attracted a broad range of approaches which include both the 'minimalist' and 'maximalist.' While the first is tied to coexistence the latter emphasizes reciprocal healing, restoration and forgiveness. The two approaches are not however mutually exclusive of each other. Reconciliation can take place within the family between members, between an individual and the community or between two smaller or larger groups.

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The transformation of relationship evident in reconciliation creates a new social context for a peaceful shared future. This objective has led to a new paradigm within peace studies; scholars insist that over and against the

victim and the wrongdoer, that which occupies pride of place in reconciliation is the relationship among the disagreeing parties. Ignasi Oliva therefore sustains that the old paradigm which focuses on the resolution of a single conflict has given way to a new conceptual framework which focuses primarily on the construction of a new relationship resulting in a win-win situation rather than a win-lose scenario; this makes reconciliation a structure process (Oliva 2010/2011, 21).

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### Christian Concept of Reconciliation:

Reconciliation depicts a new reality in the New Testament and highlights within Christianity the new creation (2 Cor 5:17). From the New Testament Greek word *καταλλαγή* it emphasizes change, exchange and the other, and depicts the re-establishment of an interrupted relationship with God and neighbour. Thus, in Christianity there is reconciliation between a self-enclosed humanity and God evident in 2 Cor 5:18-20; Rom 5:10-11; Col 1:20-22; Eph 2:11-16, and between the human persons and their neighbours in 1 Cor 7:11.

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Sin created an enmity between God and humanity and the human person became an object of God's wrath. Through redemption Christ interiorly transformed and justified human beings by re-establishing them as adopted sons and daughters of God and thus at peace with God. Reconciliation with God consists therefore in a restoration of a jeopardized son/daughter-father relationship of human beings with God. It is a re-creation which gives rise to a new reality; a new creation. The victim of man's rebellion is God himself; but based on his love for his creation (1 John 4:9-10), he is the agent of reconciliation who takes the initiative through Christ as his instrument. God is the one who in mercy and faithfulness reconciles and continues to reconcile through the ministry of reconciliation inaugurated in the Apostles

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while the human person is the one reconciled. Reconciliation through Christ on the cross implies a restoration of God's forfeited favour in satisfaction of his justice. This enables God, in consistency with his own nature, to be favourable towards sinners. The justice of God whose holiness abhors and wraths over sin calls for the punishment of sinners. This justice is satisfied in the death of Christ so that it is the death of Christ that reconciles humankind to God (cf. Eph 2:16), makes God the friend of men and women and enables him to pardon and save them. **This** death of Christ was the provision of God's love rather than something done by another to appease him and change his character. It was the ransom paid at God's own expense because of the value God attaches to the human person. Fellowship with Christ consists in welcoming those who do not deserve one's forgiveness. God's rule in the fellowship is grace, and this is the key to reconciliation which in Christianity remains a chain of God in Christ to humans and humans in Christ to God and therefore to fellow humans.

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Reconciliation with God makes for reconciliation with fellow human beings by ending the walls of division between Jews and Gentiles so that what was two has become one entity (Eph 2:11-22). The restoration to the status of adopted sons and daughters of God makes every human person son and daughter of the same **father** and therefore brothers and sisters and reconciled with everyone. While restoration to grace through redemption implies objective reconciliation there is the subjective dimension of reconciliation. Through subjective reconciliation the human person as a subject must make an individual act of reconciliation as a personal renewal in view of the loving relationship with God and the neighbour. A reciprocal response to God's initiative which would necessarily include incorporation through baptism into the followership of Christ in the Church. Here the effect of the destroyed wall of division is tested, experimented and

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experienced in the manner of the immanent-transcendent mystery of creating and unifying love through which everything is held in relationship in the act of self-giving (Bohr 1999, 132). It is in this practice that the desire to also be together in the pilgrim Church will constantly renew the quest for reconciliation in view of the awaited eschatological perfect and final reconciliation of all in heaven and on earth to God and to one another. Reconciliation enhances the locus for encountering God and others and creates a condition in which people appreciate the importance and need for others.

Christian objective reconciliation presupposes primarily sin, God's compassion and faithfulness to his creature, the facilitation of Christ as the means, and human beings as one new creation. Subjective reconciliation in addition entails the acknowledgment of sin, request for forgiveness and the effort at remaining at peace with each other on account of God.

### **Reading Luke 15:11-32 as the Parable of Reconciliation:**

The parable of the compassionate father (Luke 15:11-32) is narrated in response to criticism from the Pharisees and Scribes. The criticism is on Jesus' association with publicly recognized wrongdoers (Luke 15:1-2) considered to be in a strained relationship with the rest of Israel and therefore with God. It depicts a broken relation between a father and his younger son, and the elder son and his younger brother. The strained relationship consists in an unorthodox request for a share of inheritance made to a living father by a son who subsequently departs from the family to squander the inherited property. The estranged son takes a decision afterwards to reconcile with his father by returning home and asking to be readmitted. While the younger son's decision to return attracts the compassion of his father who acknowledges him as his son, it meets with the disapproval of his elder

brother. He refuses to recognize him as his brother and consequently refuses to have any dealings with him and his father. As Alan Culpepper puts it, the parable depicts adolescent rebellion; alienation from family; the appeal of the new and foreign; the consequences of foolish living; the warmth of home remembered; the experience of self-encounter; awakening, and repentance; the joy of reunion; the power of forgiveness; the dynamics of brotherly love that leads to one brother's departure and the other's indignation; and the contrast between relationships based on merit and relationships based on faithful love (1995, 304).

G. V. Jones had earlier on captured similar sentiments in his suppositions that the parable "combines into a succinct pattern such themes as freedom and responsibility, estrangement, the personalness of life, longing and return, grace, anguish, and reconciliation...universal characteristics of life and...basic human need" (Jones 1964, 174).

The parable begins with a bond that relates the three to one another; "there was a man who had two sons" (Luke 15:11). It focuses on the relationship of the two sons to their father and their father to them and consequently as indicated later in vv. 27 and 32 the basis for which they are related to each other as brothers; their being sons of the same father. It underscores family tie as the context within which the request for inheritance is made and granted; the locus in which the strained relationship takes place. It is the context in which the estranged son is confident to seek redress with hope as well as the locus on which the father feels compassionate to welcome enthusiastically a prodigal son. The same bond allows the father to invoke a connection between his servants and the celebration of the return because all that belongs to him deserves the services of his servants. It is an encounter in which the elder son emits sentiments of resentment and frustration towards the younger son and his father for the injustices he

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experiences from the circumstances surrounding the younger son's ominous activities. The family relation provides the impetus for the father's prompt reaction to the frustration of the elder son. He swiftly journeys out of the house for the second time to dialogue with the elder son and invites him at the same level of family bond to accept his brother. It is the basis for which the elder son is invited by the father to accept his brother by viewing him as a brother and not just as the son of his father.

The prevalence of dialogue in the parable is another important feature common in reconciliation. There is a conversation between the younger son and his father, an interior monologue of the younger son in his estrangement, conversation between the father and the servants, the elder son and the servants, and the father and the elder son. The dialogue between the returned younger son and the father, and the father and the elder son constitute channels of communication where hurts are made known, wrongdoings acknowledged and owned up to, and regrets and request for forgiveness are made known, and clarifications sought and given. The symphony and dancing used to celebrate the return of the estranged son is yet a notable feature. The two elements express the harmony restored in the relation between the father and his son as well as the servants. The invitation to celebrate constitute the invitation especially to the elder son to be in concert with his father in the reconciliation of the estranged son with the family.

The parable thus underscores the basis for God's initiative in reconciling an estranged humanity to himself (compassion and faithfulness) and proposes same as the motive for human beings to be reconciled with one another. The parable is meant to depict God's compassion towards all his own, and his invitation through Jesus to the self-tagged righteous to be disposed towards wrongdoers especially given their common origin in God as brothers and sisters. While God's compassion towards his own makes for

his readiness to reconcile all to himself, the common brotherhood of Israel as God's people imposes on the Pharisees and Scribes, representing the self-style righteous, the need to be reconciled with the public sinners and accept them as God himself has done in Christ who welcomes and eats with them.

### **Exegesis of Luke 15:25-32:**

*<sup>25</sup>Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. <sup>27</sup>And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' <sup>28</sup>But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, <sup>29</sup>but he answered his father. 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me kid, that I might make merry with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' <sup>31</sup>And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found' (Revised Standard Version, 2nd edition)*

The exegesis centres on a synchronic reading of the text without concern for the textual problems associated with the parts. The celebration that ends the first part of the parable 15:11-24 provides the background for the introduction of the second part 15:25-32. The text may be divided into vv. 25-28a Conflict and vv. 28b-32 Attempt at Reconciliation through dialogue.

### **Conflict at the Return of the Elder Son (vv. 25-28a):**

This section centres on the conflict that follows the return and anger of the elder son. The elder son returns from the field and makes inquiries about the celebration. His return in v. 25 from the field testifies to his active involvement with the work of the father against the unavailability of the younger brother who went his own way. The field was still a property of his father but due to become his at the father's death. While he worked and

waited patiently for when the inheritance would be his own, the younger son forced the father in an unusual and unsecure manner to give him a share of his inheritance. In the book of Numbers, the Jewish custom required of a father to bequeath his estate to his sons by will *diathēkē* to be executed at his death (Numbers 36:7-9; 27:8-9). He could also do it by gift *dōrēma* to the children while he is still alive. This second is expressed in Latin as *donatio inter vivos*; it was obtainable but considered a risk on the part of the father who during his lifetime could end up with nothing and abandoned by the recipient children. This risk then must have informed the caution in the book of Sirach 33:20-21, 24. "...And do not give your property to anyone else, in case you regret it and have to ask for it back..... The day your life draws to a close, at the hour of death, then distribute your heritage" (New Jerusalem Bible). Rabbinic legislations equally specify what must obtain in the event of premature distribution of goods by a father. The father retains a right to the interest from the estate until his death. If sold by the recipient son the purchaser can only take possession after the death of the father. If sold by the father, the purchaser has ownership of the estate only during the lifetime of the father [Baba Batra 8:7 in (Culpepper 1995, 301)].

The right of a first son is equally protected; he is entitled to a double portion of the inheritance (Deut 21:17). Of the two sons in the parable therefore the first has a right to two thirds of the estate while the younger son owns one third. The materials mentioned as being called for by the father at the return of the younger son however, indicate that he still has right over some of his goods despite the early distributions. These materials include the robe, his ring, sandals and the fatted calf (Luke 15:22-23) as well as his remark in v. 31 "all I have is yours." The younger son would probably have converted his inheritance into cash; this may be the connotation of the verb *synagein* 'bring together' from the phrase "gathered together all he had" in v.

13. He may have asked the father to quantify his share of the estate in cash and give him the cash. This may most likely explain why the father still acts in the parable as one who still had ownership of the estate. Or the younger son may have sold them to a third party.

The house to which the elder son draws near (v. 25b) is a place of encounter for a family where each member returns at the end of engagements with the outside world; it is a social unit. The son hears what the author describes in Greek as συμφωνία *symphōnia* and χορός *choros*. P. Barry and G. F. Moore ignited debates in the 1904/05 on the meaning intended by the third evangelist for the first word *symphōnia*. While Barry understood it, in line with the Greek usage in Daniel 3:5, as a musical instrument usually translated as “bagpipe” (Barry 1904, 180-190) Moore and others like M. J. Lagrange were critical of the interpretation and insisted it should be taken to mean music; symphony (Moore 1905, 166-175). Most modern scholars translate the term as music and the same translation is used in most modern English versions of the Bible (see New International Version and the New Jerusalem Bible). The term denotes the sound produced by several instruments; music, or a group of performing musicians; band or orchestra. It also means a wind instrument; but in relation to Luke 15:25 it is to be understood as referring to music (Bauer, et al. 2000, 961) and is interpreted within this work in this sense. Notably, it is the only passage in the New Testament in which the term is used in this sense.

Of interest to this work is the etymological connotation of the term *symphōnia*; the verb *symphōneō* means being alike, or agree with, fit together, be in agreement or in harmony, to have come to an agreement about something or be of one mind (Matt 18:19; 20:2; Acts 5:9). The noun σύμφωνος *symphōnos* implies being in tune with, attuned to, harmonious or being in agreement. As music, the noun *symphōnia* pertains to the harmony

or agreement of sounds which then makes sense to the ears as music. It has been used from the time of Plato to denote harmony of feelings and the consequent union among human persons [Plato *Leg.* 3.689d in (Spicq 1994, 324)]. Singing together and dancing express being in concert, an agreement, oneness and harmony. The music and dancing in v. 25 therefore express the restoration of harmony between the father and his estranged son, along with the servants. The nuance of this agreement is accommodation, participation and affinity.

***A Spontaneity that kills the fatted Calf versus a Restraint that guards the Ego:***

The elder son asked the servants about what was happening v. 26. He was inquisitive; but would not dare spontaneity by going in to experience what was happening and be caught up in it. By going in straight away, his response would have likely been spontaneously participating in the dancing and singing. It would have afforded him the opportunity to experience his wretched brother first hand and be sympathetic towards him. He was too cautious and did not want to be caught unaware and would not replay the father's spontaneity in running to meet the returning son and killing the fatted calf. Spontaneity brings out the innocence in persons and in that innocence, things oftentimes take favourable twists. In spontaneity one equally risks being taken for granted, being snubbed, and misunderstood. The fear of these makes people overprotective of their ego and dignity. But there are moments when one need be spontaneous and give up on those possible consequences for the greater good anticipated. That is the fatted calf that one need be generous enough to kill for reconciliation to take place. His asking one of the servants indicates that he still needs someone in his life and cannot pretend to do it alone. 'Your brother has returned' v. 27 is the reply he gets. He is not mentioned by name or in relation to the father. A name



makes for distinctiveness, 'your father's son' makes it the possession of another, 'your brother' makes for a relationship, his own possession. In other words, the cause of the celebration is very much about him, about that which is his own. A response that seeks to make him an integral part of the reason for the celebration and therefore offers him the platform for spontaneously blending into the music and dancing.

Your father has killed the fatted calf. Fatted for feast, for a big day, the best and most precious property, it is a prime beef, mostly for sacrifice to God. Killing it shows the level of generosity and graciousness, and happiness at the return. Reconciliation implies being able to forgo the damage caused by the aggressor as a victim, letting go is the generosity that kills the fatted calf. What has been damaged may not be restored by the aggressor, but only the victim can in the spontaneity that makes for generosity set the pace for the path to a new beginning in the restoration of the damaged relationship by putting the destroyed past behind and accepting to make up with the aggressor. This spontaneity on the part of the victim makes him not count the cost of the damage, not fear the danger of re-embracing the aggressor, and not mind the destroyed dignity. This ignoring of the cost, and the danger posed by the aggressor is the fatted calf the victim has to kill for the purpose of reconciliation and which the elder son is not comfortable with. His selfishness, in wanting to be seen as the only better and loyal son, and not wanting to share the attention again with the younger son mark his restraint.

### ***Anger that dehumanizes the Wrongdoer***

He was angry v. 28. Anger is a human emotion of instant displeasure in the face of something evil; it may not be avoided but must not be allowed to continue unabated. An unabated anger loses sight of the humanity of the person responsible for the anger and turns the victim into an aggressor. That

is why God is described as slow to anger, abounding in love and compassion (Psalm 103:8); compassion and love flower where anger is curbed. A man who is slow to anger is capable of overlooking transgression (Prov 19:11) because while anger exaggerates transgression and revive a sense of sadness and disappointment, compassion sees through the eye of the aggressor and discovers his or her humanity which stands as a victim in need of help. Anger emphasizes and demands the rights of the victim even to the detriment of the rights of the aggressor and the relationship. Compassion on the other hand, seeks to uphold the right of the victim in the context of value for the right of the aggressor and the relationship.

The decision not to enter is expressed by the verb *θέλω thelō* which implies a resolve not to enter into communion with the other members of the household. The ironies are puzzling; while the younger son's request or concern for his rights and departure brought tension to the family and kept the father anxious, his return brought joy and peace to the family. While the elder son's permanence, and faithful service bred peace, serenity and prosperity in the family, his return from the field of service and consequent concern or clamour for his trampled rights bring tension to the home. So, a victim's reaction to a tensed situation or relationship caused by the imprudence of the aggressor must not be equally imprudent **less further** tension be provoked. It must be prudent and reconciliatory.

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### **Reconciliation through Dialogue (vv. 28b-32):**

**The Father's rush to meet yet another son presents an image of a reconciliatory father who does not reciprocate a son's separation but sees always a son.** He calls him to himself by entreating him and seeking to calm his nerves and reduce tension (v. 28). This disposition creates room for communication through dialogue and thus provides the son with the occasion

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to express his misgivings. The elder son's anger emphasizes the injustices suffered and the rights denied him. All he remembers is nothing of any favour or grace experienced from the father; only his own merits, fairness and faithfulness. On his part, years of faithful service and obedience (29bc), on the part of the father, ingratitude in relation to his services which have gone uncompensated (29de). On the part of the younger son, a squander-maniac and companion of harlots, immensely compensated for being wasteful (30abc). The comments are replete with first person pronouns which in relation to the elder son are 4 and the possessive 'my' in v. 29; these indicate his understanding of life as being only about him. He desires a kid to celebrate not with the father's servants but only with his friends (29e); this is contrary to the father's decision to celebrate with the servants (vv. 23-24). He fills his mind with these thoughts and these in turn block his mind from a recognition of his father standing before him. He sees only an unjust person, an accused who must hear the wrongs done to him. Same egocentrism denies a relationship with his brother who is but only the father's son. No good words for any person except himself. The father is unjust and uncaring, the younger brother useless, unproductive, squanderer and scoundrel both of whom deserve to be disassociated with. He is the only good and faithful one and the victim of all the dynamics of family relationship who alone deserves the fatted calf, not the useless brother. These are always the revelations of anger which never reveals the ugly side of the angered one. Anger is like the devil telling you what is denied you and why you must show disapproval and offers you no occasion to turn inward and discover where you have gone wrong, where you have in any sense been responsible for the aggressor's unfairness to the relationship.

***Family Relationship as the Presupposition of Mercy***

The elder son in his concern for his perceived trampled rights ceases to value his relationship with the father and the brother. Just as the younger son's demands for his right failed to pay attention to the damage he was to do to his family relationship. In anger the faithful elder son becomes worst and less respectful than the younger son who in all cases addresses the father as 'father.' The elder son's action depicts a break in a relationship between him and his father and the younger brother. In reply the father uses the term 'son,' against the non-use of the word 'father' by the elder son and underscores consciousness of that which makes it even possible for the two to express their feelings; the family relationship (v. 31). While the son sees only what he is deprived of, the father brings his attention to what he has in abundance which by far outweighs the fattened calf and all he thinks he is deprived of. The 'all I have' may refer to the two-thirds left as well as the one-third which the father may have bought back from the younger son. Faithfulness to the father puts at the disposition of the faithful one all the father has; he is not aware of the enormity of his estates because he is never in want; one is only aware of what s/he has had when s/he is in want. This was the case with the younger son in the far country (v. 17). The elder son's self-centred anger makes it impossible for him to see beyond the injustice and deprivations he thinks he suffers. While the son's dialogue centres on himself to the exclusion of the others, the father's reply is here directed to him but in an inclusive manner that places the family at the centre (v. 31).

The father restates the urgency of celebrating because what is more precious than a fattened calf; a human being has been reclaimed safe and sound. His life is worth more than estates, a member of the family is back, his life is worth more than the damage he caused to the relationship; he remains a son notwithstanding his failings. Because he is a son of the father he is a brother to the elder son, and remains a brother notwithstanding his

failings and must therefore be shown mercy and be reintegrated. While the elder son sees a son of the father, the father sees his son, and a brother to his elder son, he sees a relationship which must be restored and healed. Anger sees a stranger, love and compassion see a relation to be rehabilitated and a relationship to be salvage through reconciliation. The father's role is important too for reconciliation; while it takes two to dialogue; it takes three to mediate a dialogue and make reconciliation possible. That is the role of the father in the entire dynamics of the tensed family relationship put forward by the parable. This consists in his going back and forth between the two sons. He is a victim, and at the same time the mediator who has had to pay a prize for the family to stay reconciled. It depicts the Christian view of reconciliation in which God himself satisfies the justice required of humanity's sin against him at his own expense by releasing his only son to die on account of humanity's sin.

### **Conclusion:**

The parable in this context proposes mercy/compassion as the weapon of the victim in the dynamics of reconciliation with a wrongdoer. This implies forgiveness and putting behind what wrongs have been committed by the wrongdoer. The basis for which the parable makes this proposal is the recognition of a father-son and brother-brother relationship within which there is only a win-win situation. The father is conscious of and careful to restore the family relationship. He calls the elder son, 'son.' Reconciliation for the younger son means learning to call 'father' again while it means for the elder son learning to say 'brother' again (see Gen 33:3-4). By the parable's standard, being a son opens one to being a brother. The comments of the elder son to the father reflect the life of one who lives by justice and merits. He tends to count on his faithfulness and this blurs his awareness that

he is still subject to grace and therefore capable of experiencing and exchanging grace. Only those who experience forgiveness know the joy of grace and therefore capable of being gracious to others.

This gracious relationship within which the wrongdoer can acquire a lost dignity and be re-humanized and the victim regain lost confidence is underscored as being more valuable than the wrong committed. In other words, it offers the victim an opportunity to appreciate the humanness or humanity of the wrongdoer in need of restoration. In the very exercise of that mercy in the context of the family tie, the victim generates a positive sentiment which helps heal the hurts from the root. It is from that very root of family tie that the offence is committed and it is that very root that is wounded. It is in the consciousness of the disregard for the tie that the magnitude of the wrongdoing is perceived to be so hurting; if this were done by an enemy: it would have been more tolerable (see Psalm 55: 12-14).

One must view the rival as a brother, a sister, a father, a mother or a son with whom there is an undeniable bond. On the strength of that bond the need for reconciliation may be felt and sought after. The inability of the elder son to recognize the younger son as a brother except as son of his father constitutes an obstacle to his show of compassion towards him. It consequently makes it difficult for him to accept to reconcile with him. The father's recognition of the younger son as his son paves the way for his show of compassion and acceptance to reconcile with him. In the same spirit of solidarity, he thus requires his elder son to be part of the reconciliation with his brother. From the perspective of the Christian universal family, human persons, by virtue of the reconciliation attained by Christ are sons and daughters of the one God and therefore brothers and sisters to each other. In the events of conflicts this common bond must be emphasized and re-proposed as the basis for which parties in conflicts cannot afford to go their

different ways and avoid reconciliation. Seeing the other as a stranger often impedes reconciliation.

The dialogue evident in the parable especially between the elder son and the father allows for shared experiences. These shared experiences and stories help create an emotional bridge between parties in a conflict, revealing common beliefs and concerns. The consciousness of existing pains on the other side of the divide may enlighten the victim's compassion towards the aggressor which may in turn initiate a process of a re-humanizing of the perpetrator. The quest for reconciliation underscores the importance of relationship especially in the management of differences in a minimally cooperative platform. The situation that often faces post-conflict societies is a relation determined by antagonism, fear, disrespect, distrust, hurt and resentment. These sentiments do not often make for a hopeful post conflict regeneration. Academically and politically, international communities have resorted to reconciliation in the attempts at redirecting these negative sentiments and enhance mutual trusts among people struggling to rebuild a post conflict society. It is through reconciliation that it becomes possible for former enemies to reassess their previous relationship and their conflict-ridden past

Conflict is a social reality which follows from the nature of the human person as a social being. It remains inevitable and can be transforming when the parties in conflict are open to each other as humans who share a common patrimony beyond their misunderstanding. Conflict implies a relationship; its management and resolution implies and transforms a pre-existing relationship and is therefore predated by a relationship. In a post conflict return to the *status quo ante*, transformed relationship is in turn predated by conflict. When facilitators of reconciliation in conflict situations elaborate on existing ties or relationship between parties in conflict an avenue may be

created for an appreciation of the need for reconciliation through a compassionate disposition towards one another. Comprehension and compassion often become realities where there is recognition of every human person as a father or a mother, a son or a daughter, and a brother or a sister.

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