

In the 1950s and 60s the five-and-dime store was invented and then dominated by two entrepreneurial giants Woolworth's and K-Mart. Like the giants Wal-mart and Target today, both these marketing geniuses broke ground for the megastores that have now asphalted forests and farmlands.

The idea both Woolworth's and K-Mart's sold was that you could get virtually anything and get it cheap at their stores. It did seem that they stocked everything from dishes to dresses to tools and toys; from a hundred colors of thread and a hundred types of candy to cosmetics and . . . **CROCODILES!**

Yes, crocodiles. Small crocodiles. Okay, they were probably South American caimans. But along with a seemingly endless supply of those remarkably short-lived baby turtles (and at Easter baby chickens), crocodiles were a very popular item among kids who longed for a pet, who only had 75 cents, and who lived in a very small house or apartment. For a few coins they could purchase a six-inch-long wonder: a big-eyed, long-nosed, whip-tailed, (thankfully) still small-toothed crocodile. Kids could feed it a few bugs or minnows while the wonderfully exotic little creature fed their imaginations.

Crocodiles are strange, primitive-looking creatures that possess a host of unusual characteristics. Perhaps one of their most fascinating features, however, is that crocs continue to grow in length, girth, weight, throughout the course of their lives. There's no maximum size for crocodiles to reach. They simply increase at a ideal rate of about one foot per year. In the wild the toll of available prey, predators, old-age, and disease makes it unusual for any individual to make it past 15-20 feet. But given perfect conditions and health it's possible a crocodile could grow as large as 30 or 40 feet in length. Indeed, that's the point. There's no proven upper size limit for the creatures.

So how could k-Mart sell to a kid a crocodile that could grow up to take over the whole house and eat everyone in it? Every crocodile was sold in a box that was a part of the deal. And a warning went with the croc-in-the-box: Never leave the crocodile outside of its box. Never. Ever. If kept inside the box, the crocodile would never grow any bigger than the box in which it lived. Even though there was nothing genetic to keep the baby dime-store crocs from growing to enormous sizes, as long as they remained inside their boxes, as long as they were never exposed to greater space and freedom, they would stay the same small, kid-friendly size.

The human mind and soul is a lot like those little crocodiles. Given unlimited food, nurturing environment, and a safe place to develop, the growth of our minds and souls is amazing. We've been given the capacity to grow without predetermined limits. There's no point at which your heart becomes too tender, your mind becomes too saturated with wisdom, your soul inhales too deeply of God's love and power.

That is, unless we allow ourselves to be stuffed into a box. *Need some boxes

A box of callousness; a box of envy; a box of hatred; a box of bigotry; a box of ignorance; a box of preconceptions; a box of fear; a box of apathy; a box of despair; a box of pride; a box of self-righteousness. Most of the time these boxes are self-made. We build them about ourselves thinking we're protecting some precious idea or conviction. The truth is we're simply too frightened, or lazy, or angry to deal with the new information, the new situations, that the Spirit is sending us.

Sometimes these boxes are imposed upon us by the hard-hearted, small-minded, mean-spirited boxes dwelt in by others who have power over us.

Take George Dawson, who died in July 2001, at age 103. He outlived his four wives, his four siblings, and two of his seven children. Born in Texas, the grandson of a slave, George Dawson became a farm laborer at four. His best friend was lynched. For the first 98 years of his life, George Dawson couldn't read or write. Suddenly, he decided it was never too late to learn, so he decided to learn to read and write. Listen to his own words:

"I kept it a secret that I couldn't read. When I traveled somewhere I could never read a sign. I had to ask people things and had to remember. I could never let my mind forget anything. I listened to the news and had to trust what I heard. I never read it for myself. My wife read the mail and paid our bills. People wonder why I didn't go to school earlier. But when I was young, I had missed my turn to go. One day, out of the blue, a man came to the door. He handed me a piece of paper which I couldn't read. He said there were some classes for adults. My turn had come. I always thought I could

drive a pike as good as any man and cook as good as any woman. I just figured if everybody else can learn to read, I could too."

For nearly 100 years, his name was X. **"Writing my real name was one of the greatest things in my life."**

"I'm still learning," he ritually said on television interviews when being asked the secret of his longevity. One of 70,000 centenarians in America, a figure that's rising rapidly, at the age of 102, George Dawson published his first book called, **Life is So Good, in the year 2000.**

Like George Dawson, maybe we find ourselves in a box forced down around us by others. Maybe we've built a cardboard fortress around ourself. But there's only one way to break out-of-the-box. The necessary tool for escape isn't sharp-edged or sharp-tongued. At first glance it doesn't appear to have any strength at all. Our sure-footed, smart-alecky, success-oriented culture considers our escape tool a frailty not a force for change.

What is the way out of the box? HUMILITY.

Humility is NOT a popular quality these days. But it's only through the grace of a humble spirit and open mind that the keys to freedom to a life outside the box is accessible.

A little girl returned home from her first day at school. "Did you learn anything?" her mother asked. The little girl replied, **"Not enough, I guess. I have to go back tomorrow."**

We ALL have to go back and learn more tomorrow. Between today and tomorrow our insights and experiences will open us up to see new possibilities and new pathways if we're only open enough to consider them and act upon them. It takes a lifetime of humility to LEAD US DEEPER & DEEPER INTO THE LEVEL OF "TRUTH."

In today's gospel text Jesus looks around at his disciples. These were leaders who had traveled with him, who had been tutored by him, who had walked with him and who witnessed his works. And yet Jesus knew that his disciples were still not at the place where they could bear the whole of his mission. They couldn't yet digest the entirety of the salvation that he was about to offer the world. The full weight of genuine discipleship would crush their fledgling faith. So, Jesus promises them that when the Spirit of truth comes to them after the events of crucifixion, resurrection, ascension this Spirit will guide them into all the truth (verse 13).

Jesus is telling his disciples that they must be open to the gradual unfolding of knowledge, of insight, of pathways, and purposes. **They must be open to the ways and wisdom of the Spirit which will gradually reveal to them the deeper purposes of the Father and the Son.**

TOWARD THE END OF HIS LIFE...Jesus instructed his own hand-picked disciples to accept their limitations, to wait for wisdom from on high, to remain open to the new insights and acknowledge THE SPIRIT OF GOD in their lives and all that He would reveal.

Recently, I discovered a story that touched my heart. A STORY, whether it's a true story or not, belongs in the category of an "urban legend"... but whatever the case, **it makes a good point about SALVATION, ABOUT "REDEMPTION," AND ABOUT "GRACE."**

The story is about a man who was driving home from work one day, during rush hour, when suddenly his car began to choke and sputter... and then the engine just died. Fortunately, the man was able to coast into a service station. He tried his engine again. It wouldn't even turn over. As he pulled out his cell phone to call for a tow truck, he saw a young woman come out of the convenience store which was attached to the service station.

It looked like she slipped on some ice and fell into the pump. The man got out of his car and went over to check on her. As he approached her, he realized that she had not slipped at all, but had slumped against the pump, crying. She looked tired and anxious and as she had slumped over, she had dropped a nickel. The man picked up the nickel and handed it to her.

At that moment, it all came into focus for him:

- the crying woman, - the ancient Suburban crammed full of stuff, - with three kids in the back, - one in a car seat,
- and the gas pump reading \$4.95.

He asked her if she needed help. Was she okay? She said: “I don’t want my children to see me crying. The gas pump was blocking their view. She said she was driving to California. Her boyfriend had left her two months ago and she had not been able to make ends meet. In desperation, she had called her parents with whom she had not spoken in five years. They lived in California and said she could come live with them until she could get back on her feet. So, she had packed everything she owned in the car... and with very little money in her purse was trying to make it to California.

The man said: “And when you slumped against the gas pump, you were praying, weren’t you? Obviously, you were because God heard you and sent me.”

With that, the man took out his credit card and swiped it through the card reader on the pump, so she could fill up her car completely and while it was fueling, he walked over to McDonald’s next door and bought two big bags of food, some gift certificates... they could use later... and a big cup of coffee.

The young woman gave the food to the kids in the car. They attacked it like hungry wolves. Next, the man gave the young woman his gloves and a gentle hug... and then he said a quick prayer for their safety on the road.

As he wished them well and turned to go back to his car, the woman said: “What are you... some kind of angel or something?” The man said: ***“At this time of year, angels are busy, so sometimes God uses regular people like me.”***

Now, when I first heard this story, it reminded me of “The Parable of the Unjust Steward,” in Luke 16, because we see here that God can use regular people... and sometimes he can also use rascals.

The unjust steward was just that... unjust, a rascal. He had been misusing his master’s money... and it cost him his job. However, he didn’t just give up. He came up with a plan.

He went to his master’s debtors and said to one: “You owe a hundred measures of oil. Take your bill and write fifty.” To another, he said: “You owe a hundred measures of wheat, take your bill and write eighty.” And, strangely, amazingly, incredibly, the parable ends with the master commending the steward for his shrewdness.

Now, what on earth is this parable all about? Scholars have debated this over the years.

- Some say it’s about money and the lesson is: “Don’t worship money.” “Don’t put material things before God.” “Put your trust in God, not money.” “Use your money to do good, not to do bad.”

- Some say it’s a contrast parable, an “If Only Parable,” and the meaning in this story would be expressed like this. If only Christian people were as eager and ingenious and unimaginative in their attempt to serve God and do good as worldly people are in their attempts to attain money and comfort, the church would be stronger and the world would be a better.

- **Some say it’s about stewardship and the responsibility we all have as stewards of our master.**

- **Still others say it’s about grace... and I find myself resonating to this one because in many ways the unjust steward reminds me of the prodigal son.**

- *The steward did things that were selfish and wrong... and so did the prodigal.*
- *The steward mis-used his master’s money... and so did the prodigal.*
- *The steward ended up in trouble and then came to his senses... and so did the prodigal.*
- *The steward was reconciled and celebrated in the end... and so was the prodigal... and neither of them deserved it!*

Both stories remind us that we can’t earn forgiveness, we can’t merit redemption, we can’t win reconciliation.

Reconciliation can only come when the one who has been wronged says: ***“You have done me wrong. You have hurt me deeply... but I still love you and I forgive you... and that is called amazing grace.”***

Sometimes people tease us about speaking about God’s love and grace. When that happens, I think of Marco Polo. In the 14th century, when he came back to Venice from his travels in Cathay, Marco Polo described the incredible wonders he had seen there. People didn’t believe him and for the rest of his life (and even on his death bed) they tried to get him to confess that he had lied and exaggerated about the wonders he had described. His last answer was: ***“I never told the half of it!”*** That’s the way I feel about God’s love and grace – “I have never told the half of it!”

Thank God, most of us still have a bit of time to still share with others the “GOOD NEWS” about God!! Amen.