

Father Ronald Rolheiser a well-known spiritual writer whose weekly column appears in our archdiocesan newspaper *The Witness* recounts a story that strikes at the heart of this weekend's scriptures.

There was a young Jewish boy named Mortakai who refused to go to school. When he was six years old, his mother took him to school, but he cried and protested all the way and, immediately after she left, ran back home. She brought him back to school and this scenario played itself out for several days. He refused to stay in school. His parents tried to reason with him, arguing that he, like all children, must now go to school. To no avail. His parents then tried the age-old trick of applying an appropriate combination of bribes and threats. This too had no effect.

Finally, in desperation they went to their Rabbi and explained the situation to him. For his part, the Rabbi simply said: “If the boy won't listen to your words, bring him to me.” They brought him into the Rabbi's study. The Rabbi said not a word. He simply picked up the boy and held him to his heart for a long time. Then, still without a word, he set him down. What words couldn't accomplish, a silent embrace did. Mortakai not only began willingly to go to school, he went on to become a great scholar and a Rabbi.

All three of today's scriptures proclaim the truth of divine grace. While I've read many good books and articles on grace and, at least in my opinion, passed on these and my own personal reflections on grace, no book and certainly no classroom or even retreat conference can hope to fully express the mystery and effects of divine love which we term “grace.” Grace, simply, and most profoundly, is the personal encounter between God and an individual human being in the deepest recess of the heart, perhaps best, but still inadequately expressed, in the image of a loving embrace between two persons. In the story of Mortakai, what words from his parents could not accomplish, a silent reassuring embrace from the Rabbi was able to do. In the Rabbi's embrace Mortakai was able to overcome his fear. The Rabbi's embrace assured him that all

would be well, and that he could step into the future knowing that he was, and would continue to be, loved and supported.

In today's readings, King David, St. Paul and the unnamed woman in the gospel who is labeled as a "sinful woman" each experience a similar embrace of grace which changes their life. King David had committed sins of deceit and murder in trying to conceal his sin of adultery with Bathsheba the wife of his army general Uriah. Confronted by a parable of a wealthy man who in giving a banquet for a guest instead of choosing a lamb from his own enormous flock to feed him instead takes the lamb of a poor neighbor for whom it was a pet and slays it, David sees a mirror image of himself and encounters a divine embrace of conviction and forgiveness leading him conversion. St. Paul recounts his dramatic encounter with divine grace on the way to persecute the early Christians in Damascus. This divine embrace so permeated every cell of his life that he now states, "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me." And while we are not told what, when or how the woman in the gospel who crashed Simon the Pharisee's dinner party experienced her moment of divine embrace we certainly see its effects, she lavishly pours out her loving response to Jesus in an embrace of tears and a lavish anointing with perfumed oil as a symbol of the new life she now lives because of God's love poured out on her through Jesus.

What the stories of Motakai, King David, St. Paul and the woman in the gospel teach us is that grace is a divine initiative, not forced upon us and certainly not earned by our efforts. It is a freely offered gift, inviting the one to whom it is extended to allow themselves to be drawn into the embrace of divine love. Like Mortakai, in choosing to step forward into the divine embrace, King David, St. Paul and the woman in the gospel were changed, forgiven, received new life. God through Jesus especially present in this Mass invites us to come to him and experience the same divine transforming loving embrace today. Whomever we may be, whatever the state of our soul, lets not miss this opportunity today, for the first time, or once again, to be embraced by God's "amazing grace that saves and sets us free."