Jesus’ work was to reconcile us to God. Jesus’ concern was to eliminate this distance we have created between us and the one who made us out of love and for the purposes of love. Jesus’ work to reconcile us to God took many forms, including his trial, suffering, death and resurrection.

Today we have one of the most powerful gifts of Jesus’ work: his teaching us through parables. Like everything we know about Jesus, Jesus’ parables had their roots in his Jewish faith. You might recall that the prophet Nathan told King David a powerful parable about a poor man and the lamb he loved so dearly.

The most important thing to understand about Jesus’ parables is that they have many powerful meanings; that is why they are called parables. If you think back to high school geometry class, you might remember there is a geometric shape called a parabola. A parabola is a deeply curved arc, sort of like the arches that frame the ceiling of this cathedral building. A parabola is composed of many points, each one slightly different from the others. That is how they create the deep arch. So, Jesus’ parables do not reveal a single truth. Jesus’ parables reveal many different powerful truths.

Let’s think in a different way about one of the most memorable parables, the parable of the prodigal son. This is a parable of the four powers God has given you. This is a parable about the way Jesus invites us to use each of these four powers to live as people created out of love and for the purposes of love.

The first power is the power of productivity. It is the power to get the job done. This power is represented by the older son in the parable. If we are looking for a symbol of this power it could be the physical body, especially the arms and the hands. We often use our arms and hands to get the job done. That is what the older brother did. He worked in his father’s fields and the fruits of his labors were delicious: olives and wine and wheat.

In the parable we see that the power to get the job done is good, but it contains a weakness or a shadow side. The shadow side is that we begin to think that getting the job done is the most important thing in life. Getting the job done is not the most important thing in life.

That was the problem for the older son. The older son was so focused on getting the job done that when his younger brother returned home, he did not experience any joy. If the older brother was healthy and whole his main thought when his brother returned would have been, “Thank God! My brother is alive!” But the older brother never says anything like that. The older brother has made a huge mistake in putting the power of productivity in the center of his life. Just like you, the older brother was created out of love and for the purposes of love, so he makes a huge mistake when he lets productivity push love out of the center.

The second power in the parable is the power to think and understand. This power is represented by the pharisees. Though the pharisees were not part of Jesus’ original story, they are part of the parable as I have received it. The power to think and understand and ask questions is one of the greatest powers that has been given to you. If you were looking for a symbol of this power, it would be the brain.

The pharisees use their brains. The pharisees are very good at thinking and asking questions. Did you ever notice that the pharisees are constantly engaging with one of the most perplexing characters in their world, Jesus. That is a good thing.

In this parable we see the shadow side of the power of thinking. The shadow side of the power of thinking is simple: we stop thinking. Thinking is a power of strength and health and wholeness when we keep thinking. When we stop thinking, when we stop asking questions we think we have arrived at the end. Then we make judgments. That is what the pharisees do in this story. The power to think and observe and ask
questions is a very good power, we just have to keep using it. When we take a big view of the parable we realize that the thinking and observation of the pharisees is what leads Jesus to tell the parable. Like the pharisees, God has given us the power of thinking. God wants us to use this power more, not less. When we keep thinking we live more fully into the purposes and work of love.

The third power is the power to be in relationship. This power is represented by the younger son in the story. If we are looking for a symbol of the power of relationship it could be the mouth. Our speaking is the main way we create relationships.

That is what the younger son does in the story; he speaks and creates relationships. In the beginning of the story he speaks to his father and creates a new relationship: he will be independent from his father and make his own decisions.

The younger son illustrates the shadow side of the power to create relationships. He went off into the world, carrying with him a large bag full of cash. Then he used his mouth a lot and he made a lot of relationships in a short period of time. He kept making relationships with people, more or less with no thought at all about the long term effect of his words.

The power to create relationships is not good or bad in itself. Our words can do a lot of good and our words can do a lot of harm. We can create very bad relationships and we can create very good relationship. By the middle of the parable the younger son is beginning to use the second power, the power of thinking, to guide his ability to create relationships. He thinks about his father and realizes he needs to create a new relationship with his father. The younger son is very intentional, he even forms the words of the conversation in his mind before approaching his father’s house. We can learn from the younger son’s experience. Like the younger son we have the power to create good relationships or bad relationships. When we are intentional about our words and about our relationships we live more fully into the purposes and work of love.

The fourth power is the power of generosity. This power is represented by the father in the story. If we are looking for a symbol of the power of generosity it could be the heart. When we give generously, we give something that is truly valuable. The heart is a good symbol of the power of generosity because when we are generous, we share the most important parts of ourselves.

The father illustrates the power of generosity. We see this, especially at the end of the story. The power of the father’s generosity is that his generosity restores the health and wholeness of the most important things in his life, his relationship with his son. The traditional view is that this parable is about the freedom of God and the freedom in our relationship with God. God does not control our actions. That is my understanding. But if we think Jesus’ parables just have one message we will stop thinking. God did not give you that powerful brain in order for you to stop using it.

I will depart from traditional interpretations of this parable by saying that generosity also has a shadow side. Some people have refused to take this position because they imagine that the father is representative of God. Yes, God is generous, but God is not represented by the father in this parable. God is beyond any of our descriptions and representations.

The power of generosity is a very great power, but generosity has a shadow side. For me, this is illustrated by the father’s action at the beginning of the parable. I wonder if Jesus was encouraging us to think carefully about our generosity. I wonder if one of Jesus’ ideas is that the father needed to be more intentional with his words and relationships and generosity.

God has given us these four powers, so we pray for God’s grace to use them. God has given us the power to think, the power to get the job done, the power to create relationships and the power to be generous. We have sometimes spent a lot of energy arguing that one or another of these powers is good or is the best or is bad or is dangerous. That has hasn’t really helped very much. Keep working. Keep thinking. Keep on creating good relationships. Keep on being generous. Strengthened by grace we follow in the way of the one who created us out of love, for the purposes of love.