

# COLLOQUY

A CONVERSATION WITH GUTENBERG COLLEGE



Fall 2023

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# Interpreting the Parable of the Prodigal Son

by Charley Dewberry



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Jesus' parables—that is, His responding to a question by telling a story—are difficult to interpret. Difficulty arises, partly, because even how to approach interpreting the parables has generated controversy throughout the history of Christianity. Two different interpretive frameworks have been used throughout Church history, beginning at least with the Church Fathers, and deciding which is the correct framework for interpreting Jesus' parables remains an issue today. And difficulty also arises when we don't adequately consider what I would call the "structural unit" of a parable, which includes the parable and related elements that may come before and/or after the parable itself. Understanding the structural unit of each parable helps us understand what our Messiah Jesus is teaching through them. In this article, I will discuss these two interpretive difficulties using various parables to illustrate them, culminating in an interpretation of the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

### Two Different Frameworks

Two interpretive frameworks are most often used to interpret Jesus' parables: analogy and allegory. We'll start by looking at how the Jews of Jesus' time—and thus the early Christians—understood His parables. The key to their response is found in the storytelling of the Torah (the Christian Old Testament). A story (parable) in 2 Samuel 12:1-7 illustrates the type of story that should be interpreted within the framework of an analogy.

After David gets Bathsheba pregnant and has her husband killed, Nathan comes to David and tells the following story:

*Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him and said, "There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb, which he bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man and he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him; rather he took the poor man's ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."*

*Then David's anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion."*

*Nathan then said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the Lord God of Israel, 'It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul'." (NASB)*

David's response to the story is grounded in common life experience: anyone who acts *like* the rich man in the story is unjust and deserves punishment. Nathan then tells David, "You are the man." The aim of the story is for David to see that his situation is *analogous* to that of the rich man. David clearly sees the rich man's injustice in the story, but he does not see the analogy to himself until Nathan says, "You are the man." In other

words, David understood the story, but he did not understand how it was analogous to his situation; he did not understand the relationship of the story to reality.

The *narrative* of the story and the *reality* of David's situation are similar. All the features of the story, however, do not have a one-to-one correspondence to reality. David is *like* the rich man: he is a *rich* king, and *he took unjustly from someone who had less*. Bathsheba is analogous to the sheep, but she is not killed. And in this case, I do not think the "wayfarer" (traveler) corresponds to anyone in reality; he was just part of the story's narrative, the excuse for the rich man to take the sheep. The interpretive point is this: the initial focus of the analysis should be on the story itself and not the one-to-one correspondence of the story's elements to something in reality. The correspondence can be tight or loose—that is not the point. Focusing on every element of the story results in losing sight of the point of the story—the injustice of the rich man—which David understood applied to himself when Nathan said, "You are the man." The story, then, is an *analogy*. The narrative of the story is *similar* to the reality of David's situation.

Not all stories in the Old Testament are analogies, however, and thus they should not be interpreted in the same way. Ezekiel 17:1-24 illustrates a second type of story that should be interpreted within the framework of an allegory.

The story is about an eagle that rips off the top of a cedar tree and a vine that grows towards another eagle. This "story" uses symbolic language and does not rely on common human experience. It is like a coded message, and until the symbols have been decoded, the story makes no sense in reality. Therefore, the first step in interpreting this story is to find the one-to-one correspondence between all the elements of the story and reality. Only then can the meaning of the story be understood. In this case, God tells Ezekiel in verses 11-24 what the one-to-one correspondence is: the first eagle is the king of Babylon, the second eagle is the pharaoh of Egypt, and the vine is the king of Israel. Only after determining this one-to-one correspondence between the symbols and reality can the relationship between the story and reality be determined. The first-century Jews, and thus the early Christians, would have been familiar with both types of stories: analogies and allegories.

So how do we decide if a story (parable) should be interpreted as an analogy or as an allegory? If the story makes sense on its own according to human experience, then it is an analogy. If it does not make sense on its own, then it is an allegory. In the case of Nathan's story, the situation made perfect sense given human experience, and David responded as such. He understood the story without at first understanding how any of its details corresponded to reality. The Ezekiel story, on the other hand, does not make sense according to human experience until the correspondence between the symbols and the reality is solved. The text itself provides the one-to-one correspondence that makes the meaning of the allegory understandable. Eagles ripping off the top of cedar trees and vines grow-

*(Continued on page 4)*

## Calling all Alums: Gutenberg is turning 30!

Gutenberg College admitted its first class of four students in September 1994. We want to celebrate our first 30 years with an Alumni Reunion July 12-13, 2024. Mark your calendars!

## Welcome, David!



David Snider joined Gutenberg in September as its Director of Development. David has been involved with Gutenberg College and its forerunner, McKenzie

Study Center (MSC), since the early 1990s, first as a resident participating in community classes. He and his wife, Jeany (also a former MSC resident), just returned to Eugene from Canada after 28 years of working as theater artists and educators. Their two sons, Donovan and Weston, returned a little earlier to attend Gutenberg College. Donovan graduated in June, and Weston is a sophomore this year.

David is pleased to join the college's effort to build sustainability and growth through stewarding donor relationships and community engagement. He will also be working in the Eugene/Springfield area as a guide for leaders and teams in leadership development, and he will continue making theater that asks big questions.

## Welcome, Freshmen!

We are excited to welcome a new freshman class: Emmanuelle Miller, Molly Pickens, Paige Gump, Noah Roemen, Kiah Restvedt, Grace Redelsperger, and Sarah Tardibono.

Welcome class of 2027!




## Second Discussion

by Tutor Eliot Grasso

asked. And if such questions *are* asked, they may be met with hostility or judgment from the others in the room. Furthermore, in this form of “closed discussion,” attendees may be pressured to agree with officially approved answers that may be delivered with little subtlety, nuance, or understanding of contrary opinions. For an example of this, just think of a political debate in which opponents are talking *at* each other rather than *to* each other and simply exchanging canned answers in the process.

At Gutenberg, discussions are different. Listening is a valued art. Learning how to listen thoughtfully and respond to others with differing opinions without judging them is a form of kindness and loving one’s neighbor. Of course, the pursuit of truth is paramount. But the pursuit of truth is also a process that takes a lifetime. We can make progress in our understanding even if we are not correct all the time. Discussion done in this way dignifies everyone’s God-given humanity and creates an environment in which all questions can be considered carefully.

On Friday afternoons this fall term, Gutenberg students and residents meet with faculty for Second Discussion. The regular Friday discussion for Western Civilization is a time for students to examine the week’s readings and ask questions to help them pull together a road map of the political, intellectual, and artistic history of Europe. Second Discussion takes place directly after. In Second Discussion, students can ask a question about anything at all, whether or not it’s directly related to the week’s readings.


In our first week, students raised questions about the nature of the Great Books canon and about predestination. These weighty questions directly address what we should know about and why, along with the purpose, process, and nature of human destiny. Everyone in the room had an opportunity to speak to these questions in a non-combative, free exchange of ideas. We are looking forward to Second Discussion this term and are grateful to have a community in which true discussion is possible. 

## Great Book Review: *Phaedo*

by Tutor Naomi Rinehold

Upperclassmen at Gutenberg read the *Phaedo* in their Great Conversation class as a part of the metaphysics and epistemology arc (metaphysics being the study of existence and epistemology having to do with knowledge). They read it in that context because Socrates’ ideas about death stem directly from his understanding of what existence is like—specifically, how the body exists in a different way than the soul does. He argues that the soul is immortal, while the body is not, and that we gain knowledge with our souls, while our bodies and bodily senses can only get in the way. Thus, the lover of wisdom—the philosopher—looks forward to his own death with great hope and expectation. With his body gone, his soul will finally be free to become truly wise and live among other wise souls.

Does this sound familiar? We sometimes find a similar picture in Christian views of death: that our souls can finally be good and be with God once they have been freed from our bodies. To me, this view sounds more like Plato than the Bible. If Plato’s view is correct, what are we to make of the Bible’s promise of bodily resurrection? And if the soul can only be wise or good apart from the body, what are we supposed to think about Jesus’ incarnation?

And, to return to Plato’s questions, what do the answers to these questions tell us about how a Christian should face his own death? 

## Interpreting the Parable of the Prodigal Son, continued from page 3

ing towards eagles make no sense until the symbolism is decoded. The nature of a story, then, guides us when deciding which interpretive framework to use.

In the history of the Church, beginning with the Church Fathers, interpreting parables through the allegorical framework was favored over the analogical and became a major source of controversy regarding how to interpret the parables. Now let us look at the example of the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 and see which framework seems correct when it comes to interpreting the parable.

*And He [Jesus] said, There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to the father. “Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.” And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

*But when he came to himself, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger? I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” And he rose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants, “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive*

again; he was lost, and is found.” And they began to celebrate.

*Now the older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard the music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.” But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, “Look these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” And he said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It is fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:11-32, ESV)*

This story makes sense on its own: A son leaves, squanders his inheritance, and is lost to the father. At some point, this son comes back and asks to be treated as a slave. The father responds by celebrating his son’s return. The older son does not celebrate; rather, he complains to the father that he never got such attention. Thus ends the story. Because the story makes sense based on common human experience, the parable is an analogy, which resolves our first interpretive decision: What framework should we use to interpret the parable? And because the parable is an analogy, we are primarily interested in the narrative of the story rather than matching each detail to some aspect of reality.

## Structural Units

Now, let us move to a second interpretive decision: What comprises the structural unit of the parable—that is, the parable and any related elements that come before and/or after the parable itself? The simplest, most straightforward structural unit of a parable is three parts: First, someone raises a question (often the scribes and Pharisees); second, Jesus tells a story (the parable); and third, Jesus may tell us something about the relationship of the story to reality. However,

most of Jesus’ parables—the Parable of the Prodigal Son, for example—have more complex structural units. We need to pay close attention to the structural unit of each parable to understand what Jesus is communicating. So now let us look at the structural unit of the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Jesus tells the story in response to the Pharisees and scribes grumbling that He receives sinners (and tax gatherers) and eats with them (Luke 15:1-2). However, the Parable of the Prodigal Son does not follow immediately after the description of their grumbling, as it would if the parable employed a simple structural unit. Rather, Jesus tells two other, short parables before he tells the longer Parable of the Prodigal Son. Furthermore, after He tells the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus does not give us clues to the reality of the situation associated with the story. But after both of the short parables, Jesus comments on the relationship of the stories to reality. As we shall see, however, the two short parables are part of the structural unit of the longer Parable of the Prodigal Son, and they contribute both to our understanding of the longer parable and its relationship to reality.

The first of the short parables is in Luke 15:3-7:

*So he (Jesus) told them this parable: What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he finds it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (ESV)*

This story, based on the common experience of a shepherd, is an analogy: A sheep is lost, and when the owner finds it, he celebrates with friends and neighbors. And in verse 7, Jesus gives us a clue about the reality to which the parable refers: “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Jesus is saying that *like* the shepherd finding his lost lamb, there

is much joy in heaven when a “lost” sinner is “found”—that is, when a sinner repents and is then counted among the people that will inherit eternal life.

The second short parable, in Luke 15:8-10, has a similar theme:

*Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” Just so, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (ESV)*

Like the first parable, this second parable is understandable given human experience, so it also is an analogy. The narrative is very similar to the previous parable: One coin from a group of coins is lost, its owner searches for it, finds it, and then celebrates with friends and neighbors. Then Jesus tells us the reality to which the parable points: God celebrates before His messengers when one sinner repents.

Why does Jesus tell these two very similar parables? I believe He does so to set up a contrast to the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which has similar elements to the first two parables: Something is lost, something is found, and there is celebration. All three parables rely on the common experience of people who can empathize with the three situations; people whose *natural reaction* is to celebrate when something lost is found. However, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is different from the first two parables in this respect: it includes the reaction of the older brother, who grumbles about the attention the younger son is getting rather than celebrating with his father.


Jesus told the three parables to highlight the different reaction of the older son. In doing so, Jesus is addressing the scribes and Pharisees who grumbled about His eating with sinners and tax gatherers. He is pointing to their grumbling as *analogous* to the grumbling of the older son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, saying, in effect, that grumbling should not be their natural reaction to Jesus eating with sinners and tax gatherers. Why? The key to answering this question is the reality to which Jesus

*(Continued on page 6)*

## Interpreting the Parable of the Prodigal Son, continued from page 5

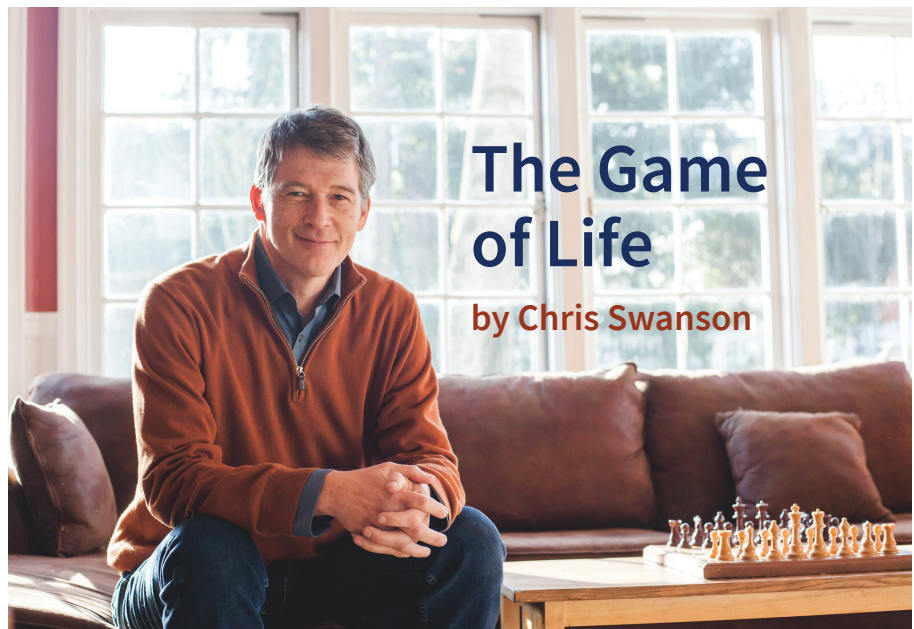


points in the first two parables. What is “lost” and then “found” is a sinful human being saved by his repentance. When that happens, heaven rejoices—which should be the natural reaction of all those who belong to God.

So then, while Jesus does not state explicitly the reality to which the Parable of the Prodigal Son points, He does communicate this reality through the two parables that precede it, as they are part of the longer parable’s structural unit. The scribes and Pharisees are grumbling about Jesus eating and hanging out with sinners and tax gatherers—the very people whose repentance causes rejoicing in heaven. Indeed, Jesus responds to the scribes and Pharisees by telling them that there is more joy in heaven when a sinner repents than when a group of scribes and Pharisees—supposedly “righteous persons who need no repentance”—are hanging out together. The grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees comes from hearts that are not “after God’s own heart,” from values that are not God’s. Both the structural unit of the parable and the analogical frameworks of the parables within it have helped us understand this truth. 

**Charley Dewberry** is the dean and a tutor at Gutenberg College and a practicing scientist and stream ecologist. He holds a B.S. in the arts, an M.S. in stream ecology, and a Ph.D. in philosophy.

Painting by **Jan van’t Hoff**, courtesy of <https://www.gospelimages.com/>.



## The Game of Life

by Chris Swanson

The Milton Bradley company introduced the “Game of Life” board game in the 1960s. I recall playing “Life” when I was a kid. You start in a little plastic car and move along the board trying to increase your assets and family while avoiding natural and financial disasters. The winner arrived at the end of the track at “Millionaire Acres.” I did not like the game too much since all of the rewards were really for adults. At seven years of age, having kids was not on the horizon. I did, however, pick up on the not so subtle clues that told me what life was all about.

Elon Musk also believes that life is a game. But instead of us playing it, we are the pieces on the board. As he describes it, our reality is actually a “virtual reality” created by a super technologically advanced being. Our universe is an enormous video game, perhaps being played by a super advanced teen drinking super advanced energy drinks in his super advanced parents’ basement. Somehow that does not stop him from wanting to be the winning character by accomplishing more than all of the other characters.

International relations between the various countries of the world is clearly a game. The winning player has the most influence, best economy, and strongest military. Each player uses its material and intellectual resources to jockey up the ladder to control things for its benefit.

School and academics have also become a kind of game. In this game, the student puts in whatever time, money,

and effort are required to win the promised outcomes: prestige, published papers, a good job, self respect, or maybe access to really great parties.

All of these games have a core similarity. The world is conceived of as a *competition* for limited “goods.” The world is the game board, and I as a player must use my wits and advantages to get to the end of the track. What people think the end of the track looks like differs, but it is generally considered to be some sort of happiness or satisfaction.

But life is not a game. There is no competition with winners and losers. We are not trying to “get the goods” and achieve our dreams. It has nothing to do with winning.

Life is more of a journey. We are not competing against others for limited resources. The key is *how* we follow our path. We all face many circumstances: joys, hardships, and challenges. Each such circumstance is an opportunity to choose to traverse the path either well or poorly. The underlying reality of our lives that defines us is *how* we get where we are going—that is, the manner by which we travel.

Despite the prevalence of the “game view” in our day, the “journey view” was more common in the past. (That is not to say the game view was not around, but it was not quite so popular.) In the ancient Greek period, a good journey was one where the traveler developed habits of virtue or excellence, especially excel-


lence in promoting the interest of the city or state one inhabited. In the Roman period, many saw the best possible path as staying aloof from the cares of the world and accepting what was. The medieval period embraced the Christian religion, but one common interpretation of the journey entailed an ascetic life of “contemplation of the divine essence.” The Enlightenment shifted back to a “worldly” journey—namely, rational understanding of the universe to make things “better,” which later shifted to an ethical principle that advocated seeking the most pleasure and least pain for the most people. People with these perspectives may have had vastly different conceptions of the nature of the journey, but all of them had this in common: the journey was not a competition. Instead, it was a cooperative or individual pursuit of internal improvement.

I believe that the Bible portrays life as a journey as well—a journey of faith. God uses the events and relationships in our lives to face us into our sin and our lack of trust in Him. He teaches us to value Him and His ways. He gives us His Word to guide us and make our paths straight.

Individuals may have vastly different resources on the journey. Some are poor; others are rich. Some have great families; others have abusive ones. Some are athletic or smart; others are uncoordinated or slow. But in the end, none of those differences matter since the journey is not about gaining worldly goods; it is about *how* we live our lives.

To adopt the game approach to life is easy. Our culture promotes it from every possible angle. Our culture picks the winners and losers and tells us to be winners. One of the challenges of the journey approach to life is deciding what life is all about. Ultimately, we have to choose which slogan we prefer:

“Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.”

“It’s not whether you win or lose but how you play the game.” 

**Chris Swanson** is the president and a tutor at Gutenberg College where he teaches science and leads discussions in Microexegesis, Western Civilization, and the Great Conversation. He holds a Ph.D. in Physics from the University of Oregon.

# Gutenberg Opportunities

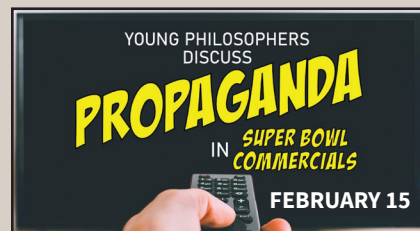
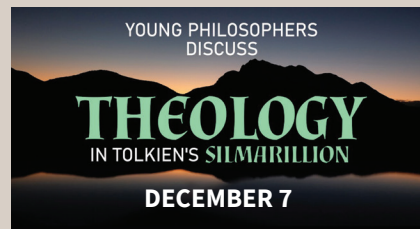


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The Gutenberg Podcast brings the world of ideas to a broader audience. Host Gil Greco and a guest tutor explore the

Great Books from a Christian perspective, recognizing their complexity in the light of competing views.



[gutenberg.edu/yp](http://gutenberg.edu/yp)



We invite high-school-aged students to join us for **Young Philosophers** in 2023-2024, as we examine some prominent

examples of pop culture and discuss their artistry, ideas, and significance.



[gutenberg.edu/gbs](http://gutenberg.edu/gbs)



In the spirit of opening dialogue among students of all ages, Gutenberg College is pleased to introduce the **Great Books Symposium**, a series of online Socratic-style seminars designed to engage mature learners in deep dialogue about the influential works of Western civilization. The format is simple: read and engage in lively discussion facilitated by a Gutenberg College tutor. First up: C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the*

*Witch and the Wardrobe*, led by Gutenberg tutor Eliot Grasso. To accommodate busy schedules, there will be multiple seminars per topic. The maximum number of attendees is twelve, so be sure to reserve your spot early.

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## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO...

Ask the right questions? Have faith?  
Participate in dialogue? Learn in  
community? Be wise? Think for  
yourself? Appreciate beauty? Pursue  
truth? Make a difference? Be just?  
Be a friend? Have confidence? Find  
meaning? Live well?

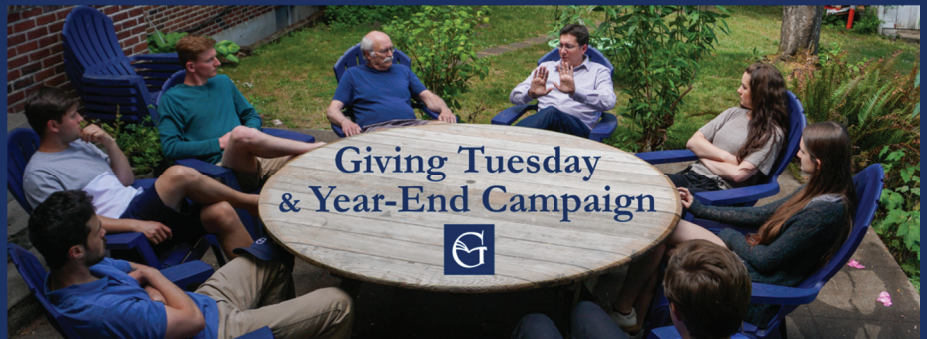
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# #GIVINGTUESDAY

## NOVEMBER 28

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