

LENT FOURTH SUNDAY, YEAR C '10 HOMILY
(Joshua 5: 9a, 10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32)
(Prodigal Son)

GIVE WITNESS TO THE FATHER'S HOSPITALITY AND COMPASSION

The Sunday School Class was studying the parable of the Prodigal Son. The teacher asked one boy: "who was sorry when the prodigal son returned home?" The kid gave this question a lot of deep thought and then responded: "the fattened calf?"

Of course, the answer the teacher was looking for was the older brother. He was the one who was unhappy about his younger brother's homecoming. And, if we are honest, we would have to say that we can identify with the elder brother. We sometimes are tempted to say the heck with those who mess up their lives through sin or who have been foolish in their choices. This happens even in our own families – which is one of the insights of this parable. As an older son, I know what resentment of my younger siblings, especially of my younger brother, feels like. But I long ago put those resentments aside and I am humbly thankful that I have my two sisters and my brother. What sealed the deal for me about my brother was when he was in a serious auto accident as a teenager – an accident that he walked away from. I realized then that just having him was what was important. Brothers and sisters also tend to grow up and have children of their own – and I am grateful to be close to their families now. Like with all relationships, getting along with siblings takes work – but it is worth it. The alternative is misunderstanding and bitterness.

I believe that we can all also relate to the situation of the younger son – no matter what our birth order. In fact, what keeps us from having the stubborn attitude of the older brother is our willingness to be honest about our own shortcomings. We have all strayed in one way or other – even if just a little – and we have all had to come back and say "I'm sorry" to God and to others. We have all hungered for forgiveness as the younger son hungered for something to eat. If we are humble enough to know our faults, we will not be quick to judge and we will realize that we have no right to judge. Being closed and cold like the older brother is a worse fate spiritually than being in the pickle that the younger boy found himself in. The prodigal brother's situation melted his heart, while the attitude of his elder brother hardened his. One of the interesting points in this parable is the refusal of the older brother to enter his father's house when the party was about to begin to celebrate the homecoming. In Middle Eastern culture, this would have been a serious insult to the father – not to enter the ancestral home at the father's request and invitation. It is important that we always be spiritually prepared to come to our heavenly father's house – to which he is always beckoning us. By the way, the parable does not tell us if the older boy eventually went in to join the party.

Of course, it is the father who is the proper main focus of this beautiful parable which is found only in St. Luke. Pope John Paul II emphasized this when he renamed this story as "The Parable of the Merciful Father." This was such a positive insight and change. Instead of the adjective "prodigal," the pope invites us to reflect on the word "merciful." This alteration turns our thoughts toward the ocean of mercy that always awaits the sinner who returns to God our Father. I am reminded of the beautiful painting of the "Prodigal Son" by the famous seventeenth century Dutch painter, Rembrandt. I

was in St. Petersburg, Russia, this past summer and was thrilled to see the original of this work in the famous museum called the Hermitage. In this painting, the father embraces the kneeling son with both of his hands. Interestingly, one hand is distinctively masculine and one is more soft and feminine – and you can see this contrast very clearly in the original which is massive in size. Rembrandt obviously was making the point that God is both strong and gentle – and aren't we glad? We can bank on his gentleness when we have to come crawling back. Furthermore, we who are made in God's image and likeness are called to mirror his compassion and forgiveness. It is part of our vocation to be strong in virtue but soft in our understanding of others and of ourselves too.

Besides the fattened calf that the boy in Sunday school mentioned, there is at least one other figure in this parable that we might consider. This is the shadowy figure of the man who hired the younger son to take care of his pigs. This figure stands for all those who exploit their fellow human beings. Let's recall that the second son was likely very young – perhaps still a teenager. Here was a Jewish boy who was reduced to taking care of pigs. This would have been odious to him and symbolic of his alienation from his culture, his childhood values, and his whole religious heritage. The man who hired him gave him no choice – it's the pigs or nothing, kid! This type of person is all too prevalent in our society and world where the young and the vulnerable and the foreigner are exploited and abused for material gain and often for base pleasure. There are folks who are out there preying on children and women and immigrants. And again, although none of us here is as monstrous as these predators, we would have to admit that in some way we can identify even with the figure of the younger son's employer. Whenever we take advantage of anyone in any way or cheat anyone or trick anyone for some gain, it is then that we have traded our Christian heritage (at least briefly) for a much baser existence.

In the end, John Paul II was right. It is the merciful father who commands our main attention. It is he whom we are called to imitate daily. If we are like him, we will invite everyone we know to fly to his loving arms in any need and we will strive to be God-like in our own capacity to forgive. There is a story told about our great president, Abraham Lincoln. Toward the end of the Civil War, someone asked Lincoln how he was going to treat the rebellious southerners when they were finally defeated and had returned to the Union. The questioner expected that Lincoln would exact some kind of revenge. But Lincoln responded: "I will treat them as if they had never been away." This is the way God treats us because of his great love for us – a love mirrored in today's parable. He proved this love by sending his son to be part of the human family. This son knew of our desolation that comes from sin because, though sinless himself, he took our sins on his shoulders and nailed them to the cross along with his body. Jesus knows of our loneliness and our sense of being abandoned which he experienced on Calvary. In his life, he chose to know how the Prodigal Son felt and how we have all felt at times when we have abandoned our true selves to become someone phony – mired in sin. But Jesus has made it possible for us to return to the Merciful Father.

One of the great tragedies of our nation's history was that Lincoln the merciful did not live to preside over the reconciliation of north and south. What a different country we would have had all these decades! So much of our division as a nation can be traced to the bitter aftermath of the Civil War. We as a church also have much to learn about compassionate forgiveness and about the healing of divisions. Any harsh treatment of the sinner is out of place in the Church of Jesus Christ and especially in the Sacrament of

Reconciliation. Each of us can teach the church about mercy by showing mercy to each other. My friends: if we as a church community here and throughout the world were able to be more and more like the Merciful Father, I guarantee you that people would be breaking those doors down to get in here – or to get back in!