

HOMILY FOR THE 4TH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is probably the best-known and most-loved of all of Jesus' parables. It has even received the title *Evangelium in Evangelio*, which means "the Gospel within the Gospel."

The context of this parable was the complaint of the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus was welcoming sinners and eating with them. This story is Jesus' justification for doing what he is doing.

It was unusual but not unheard of that a father would give his property, his inheritance, before he was dead. But, this father did. Note that he divided the property between the two brothers. It was to be expected that the father would still be able to live off the profits of the land. But, both brothers received property.

The older son did not object or try to change his brother's mind, but goes along with this arrangement.

But the younger son compounds the problem, first by selling off the property, and then by wasting the money on wine, loose women and sinful pleasures.

When the famine comes and he is starving, the younger son tries to find a wealthy Gentile patron, but when he does he is assigned the most menial of jobs, especially for a Jew – caring and feeding for pigs.

He had no money, and was hungry and cold.

He began to be in want. This describes much more than the younger son's depth of poverty, for all of humanity is in want.

Both the good and the evil that are in humanity, and therefore, in us, are represented in this man, the debauchery, and also, later, the dignity of soul.

He looks back in his mind's eye and he says: "I once lived with my father who loved me, and I had food and clothing and friends. And I was in an atmosphere of love and acceptance and affection. How could I have been so foolish to have left that all behind?"

Then he "came to himself". What does this mean?

In the process of working out our salvation, there are two things we must know? One is to know God, and the other is to know ourselves.

The two are ideally and, thank God, usually learned in parallel. And while we go through times where it seems we are learning more about ourselves than God, have faith and know that it will soon balance out. Why is this important?

If one learns only of God, you will be filled with pride, like the older son, and your soul will be paralyzed, unable to move past your own self-righteousness into love. The Pharisees knew God, and were experts in His Law and were rigid in its practice. These things, in themselves were admirable. Jesus points out again and again in Scripture that it is their blindness to their own selves that is their condemnation.

On the other hand,.....if you know only about your sins and your unworthiness and know little about God and His mercy, you will be despondent, downcast, disheartened and fearful.

But..... if we learn of ourselves and God at the same time, God will reveal both Himself and our self, within us. The Church endeavors to aid us in this growth in everything she does, but that focus is intensified during Lent. It is a time for us to have a deeper experience both of God and self.

The fruit of such knowledge is we will believe in the depths of our souls that we are great sinners....but we will be able to say to ourselves with confidence, "God will receive my repentance!....and I will see the situation I am in.... and I will want to be better, and I will know that I CAN become better! That is dignity of soul.

In the time this parable was first told, a father who had a son who treated him this way would have torn his garments and disowned his son for what he had done.

I well imagine this happening similarly today over even less.

But not this father! He wanted his son back. He loved him, was looking for him and was the first to see him. Our heavenly Father NEVER gives up on us!

The father in this parable throws away his dignity and runs to greet the son, kisses him and throws his arms around him, thus protecting him from the insults of the neighbors and family. Then the father dismisses the idea that he be a common worker or slave and he gives him gifts that symbolize setting a person apart and giving him authority. The father gives a feast, not just for the son, but to reconcile the son with the family and neighbors,

who by coming to the feast would be saying that they have accepted him back into the community of family and neighbors. In a sense, that is what we do at the Mass, especially as we stand together in agreement praying the Lord's Prayer and in the Sign of Peace we offer to one another. And then, as we move together toward the Son, in unity, to receive Him in the Eucharist.

It is worth mentioning that the reconciliation that takes place here, in today's Gospel, is not the result of the son, although the son at least came home. It is through the impetus of the father that real reconciliation takes place. Reconciliation, (Jesus seems to be saying today), does not come about because a sinner comes back and tries to make reparation, but it is the sinner's willingness to accept the gifts and love of the Father which is given freely and spares no cost.

St. Paul reminds us today of how the Father has done this:

And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ

This would be such a happy ending to the story. Except it does not end here.

The father throws a celebration, but the older son does not come. He becomes very angry and even refuses to come into the house.

He cannot accept the generosity of his father. He seems to be as angry with the father as he is with the younger son. Note what the father does again.

As he did with his younger son, the **father goes out** to the older son and tries to help him in his lost state. He again tosses aside his rights as a father to order his son, but rather he pleads with him.

He starts by calling him “my son”, which contrasts with the feeling the son has that he has always been a slave to the father. In the father’s words “you are here with me always, everything I have is yours”, he shows that the boy has always had the offer of love and sonship.

It is the son who has structured his world in such a way as to see things differently.

And here the parable does end. But there are still questions unanswered:

Did the older brother reconcile himself to the father? Did he reconcile himself with his brother? Did he become part of the community again? Jesus leaves that to us to figure out as we apply the story to our own lives.

Lent is the time for reconciliation. This is the time that we need to pray and think about our relationship with God and to start knocking down the obstacles in the way of that relationship, obstacles that only we have placed there.

This is the time to think about our relationships with others and to try to get relationships that may have deteriorated back into line.

Jesus tells us today that the restoration of a relationship does not depend on them coming back to us, but on our being accepting and reaching out to them – running to greet them as the father did.

This week I challenge us to think about both our relationship to God and our relationships with others. especially family. And if there is a weakness there, try to reach out and do something about it. I don't know about you, but I think that will keep me plenty busy.