

4th SUNDAY OF LENT – C (March 27, 2022)

Jesus is not only the master Teacher; he is also the master Story-Teller. His stories, his parables always illustrate and make so powerfully real the point of his teaching. Today we hear one of the most powerful and beloved of those parables: that of the prodigal son. Time for a quick vocabulary lesson: just what does ‘prodigal’ mean? My dictionary defines it as ‘extravagantly wasteful, characterized by wasteful expenditure’. The word can also refer to the person—‘one who spends or gives lavishly and foolishly.’

That younger son certainly fits that definition; he completely wasted his share of the inheritance he demanded from his father. That young man was obviously a self-centered, ungrateful fellow who wanted what he wanted, and he wanted it right now. No more obedience or service to his father; instead, he wanted to do things “My Way”. What a slap in the face to his father! And how that father must have suffered in seeing his son run away from home...yet he didn’t force his son to stay home or do the right thing, did he? That’s the very nature of sin—freely choosing to abandon those who love you (especially God Himself), uncaring about the pain and heartache you leave behind, and focusing only on yourself.

So the younger son went off and had a good time with all that money...until it ran out. So much for the good times, so much for the self-indulgence; instead, he hit rock-bottom. Only then did he realize what a self-centered fool he had been and he came to his senses. He would go back home and say “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.” And you know what? He was absolutely right—he deserved no such thing.

Now we turn our attention to that father, who was also ‘prodigal’ in his own way. No doubt there are many who would argue that this father was ‘extravagantly wasteful’ (i.e. ‘prodigal’) in immediately giving in to the younger son’s demand for his share of the inheritance. But the father could not force his son’s love or gratitude; he let him go. Again, how that paternal heart must have ached in seeing his son who he loved so much run away from home, knowing that that son would only hurt himself in the process. Parents, how often have you endured such a scenario—seeing your child do something you know is not good or wise, but also realizing that you can’t prevent your child (at least your older children) from committing serious sin or making serious mistakes? And so you pray daily and you wonder daily “will my child come back?”

Imagine that prodigal father waiting and wondering ‘will my son ever come back?’ Imagine him looking out from his house every day, looking down the road to the horizon...until one day (miracle of miracles!) he sees that lonely, pathetic figure coming down the road—it’s his son! The father’s response is a glorious thing to behold. First, notice what the father did not do:

- he did not stand at his house, arms folded tightly across his chest, glaring at this wastrel, prodigal son of his;
- he did not turn on him with a scornful ‘see, I told you so!’;
- he did not say ‘you can’t come back home until you pay back every cent you wasted!’

No—this ecstatic dad ran out to greet his boy; he didn’t wait for the son to come back to grovel before him. He embraced and kissed him, and ordered the servants to bring out the best things—robe, ring, sandals—and prepare a feast to celebrate his son’s return. What a marvelous family reunion for this father who was glad beyond words that his son had come back home!

But, sad to say, it wasn't a reunion of the whole family. This father's older son comes on the scene and learns about his kid brother's return. Not only did his younger brother of his leave home and waste all that money, but their father is now throwing a big party for this no-account brother of his. "It's not fair! I always did the right thing, I always obeyed you—and now you do all this for him who turned his face on you??" He was thoroughly scandalized by his father's apparently over-the-top, his prodigal forgiveness and generosity in welcoming back this brother. Unfair? Perhaps in the sense of strict justice it seems unfair. But that is the nature of love; that's the nature of mercy. It looks not only at what is 'just' or 'fair' or 'deserved', but more importantly it embraces with great joy the one who comes back. That's exactly what God does, the ultimate 'Prodigal Father'. How sad that the older brother was so angry at this supposed injustice, this perceived unfairness that he even refused to join in the welcome-home feast for his brother--one writer aptly describes it as a 'self-excommunicating anger'.

We could just as well ask: how could Jesus have possibly forgiven the thief crucified next to him and, even more, promised him paradise that very day? What about notorious sinners who have deathbed conversions or who return to the faith of their childhood at their last moments of life—hitting 'rock bottom' like that younger son—can they really expect forgiveness and a place in the heavenly kingdom (even if they some purgatory experience coming first)? **Yes**, yes they can. Does that scandalize you? Are you scandalized (like the older brother) by a heavenly Father who is so extravagant, so prodigal with his forgiveness? If so, ask yourself this question: do I want God to be merciful to me? That's not a trick question, by the way--of course, the answer is 'yes'. If that's the case, then do you really want anyone else to be denied that same mercy?

Divine mercy, saving mercy is God's to give, and he does so because of his most extravagant and 'prodigal' love for us. It is not ours to hoard for ourselves or dole out according to our limited and perhaps stunted or stingy notions of what we think of as 'fair' or 'just'. That same writer I mentioned earlier put it this way: "Often, like that elder brother, we begrudge the grace given to those closest to us. Can we accept that God loves and forgives people in our family, our workplace, our parish, our neighborhood? Or do we often throw past sins into the faces of the forgiven? That'll keep us from heaven, too, you know." A rather sobering thought...

None of us 'deserve' or 'merit' or 'earn' this amazing and unlimited love of God. But, thanks be to God, He doesn't act only on the basis of strict justice, but also on his extravagant; yes, his prodigal mercy. How grateful we ought to be every day for that gift for ourselves. And how strongly we should and are called to desire and pray for that same gift to be embraced by all others—especially those we think don't deserve it in the least.