

24th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (September 11, 2022)

This long gospel with its three parables reminds us of the power of repentance: the recognition of one's wrongdoing, an expression of sorrow for that wrongdoing, and the desire and decision to change. On the deepest level, such repentance leads to knowing the joy of God's loving forgiveness and a renewed hope for eternal joy in his kingdom.

Let's think about this for a moment on the human level. Have you ever had the experience of hurting someone you love—spouse, child, parent, sibling, friend—by something you said or did? Maybe you lashed out in the heat of the moment with harsh words or you did something deliberately hurtful. Later on you realize: 'how awful; what an idiot I was!' So what's the next step? Three options present themselves:

1. You just try to forget it and push the regret away and bury it deeply, or you try to justify your wrongdoing. Plain and simple: that doesn't work. In your heart of hearts you know it was wrong; you can't hide from it.
2. You are so filled with remorse that you think despairingly: "I've ruined this relationship; he/she will never forgive me—there is no hope for reconciliation." That doesn't work either; it's a self-imposed deep hole that you don't get out of only because you think—wrongly—that there are no other options.
3. Or...you simply and honestly admit the wrong, the harm you have done; you apologize and acknowledge the wrong done. If you haven't guessed, that is by far the preferred option.

That is what the younger son, the prodigal son, did in third and last of Jesus' parables today. His initial selfishness and self-centeredness led him to demand his share of his father's wealth. He thought he had it made; he would live only for his own pleasure. He wasted all that money on 'a life of dissipation'; other translations say 'riotous living' or 'loose living'. But then the money ran out, the party was over and the gravy train went off and left him high and dry. After bottoming out like that, his eyes were finally opened. He realized what a fool he had been, and resolved to go back home humbly to his father and simply work as one of his servants.

And the father's reaction? Not: 'get out of here; you blew it!' Not: 'you are no longer my son!' No—the father not only let him come back home, but threw a huge party to celebrate with great joy and love his son's return home. Jesus meant what he said in those two shorter parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin: 'there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance'.

St. Paul himself certainly experienced the power of repentance. In our second reading he speaks of his prior life of sin and violence; remember that before his conversion he had been an active persecutor of this new Christian faith. Then the risen Christ appeared to him; that led to his conversion that changed his life and the history of the world forever. That's why he told St. Timothy of his gratitude to God for treating him 'mercifully' for his ignorance and arrogance.

Do we believe in the power of repentance? Tomorrow/today is September 11—the 21st anniversary of the terrorist attacks on our country that killed over 3000 innocent people. We rightly and justly condemn such horrible crimes as we rightly and justly condemn all other such

crimes—all the recent mass shootings, the violence and unjust war against the innocent people of Ukraine, and all other such sins. But if any of those perpetrators ever come to realize the wrong they have done, repent of those sins and ask God to forgive them, would God do so? Yes! Of course, the forgiveness of God doesn't for a moment excuse the wrong or let them off scot-free—the demands of justice must be satisfied. But God not only can but greatly desires and promises to forgive all sins that are sincerely repented of, no matter how monstrous those sins were.

This may indeed seem grossly unfair: ‘how could God possibly forgive such awful sins?’ It reminds us of the older brother in the parable, doesn't it? He was bitterly angry with his father for throwing a big party—fattened calf and everything—for his no-good, no-account younger brother. But that father in the parable, much like our heavenly Father, truly rejoices when any one of his wayward children returns to him in true sorrow for their self-centeredness. And he pours out his tender mercy and passionate love on them. He welcomes them back to his house and his table with a gladness and joy beyond the power of words to describe.

The power of repentance is very real; it is life-changing in this life and into eternity. It allows God to give us those gifts of love and mercy that he so wants to shower upon us. Don't forget Jesus' words: ‘there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.’ He meant that, you know! Let's never be afraid to own up to our sins, to repent of them and confess them whether they are large or small, mortal or venial, and to do so especially in the sacrament of confession. Let's do so, and thus cause a whole of rejoicing in heaven...not to mention in our own hearts and souls!