



Fourth Sunday of Lent C March 31, 2019

A Story About a Loving Father and His Two Wayward Sons

Today's parable is one of the best known and most loved stories in the Bible. While it is generally called the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, scholars tell us that this story should really be renamed as the *Parable of the Merciful Father* since its main focus is not the prodigal son and his sin, but the father and his mercy. It could also be titled the *Parable of the Resentful Brother* as it calls attention to the older brother's indignation for his father's show of mercy towards the errant younger brother.

Jesus tells the story in response to the Pharisees and Scribes' criticism of him for befriending sinners. "*This man eats with sinners.*"

Sin: leaving the father's home

In the story, the son decides to leave home, asks for his share of his inheritance, and off he goes. Demanding his inheritance is like saying: "I cannot wait until you are dead. Give me what is coming to me now!" We can say all sin is a form of leaving our father's presence. When we sin, we distance ourselves from God. But God does not distance himself from us. This is an important part of this story. While the son breaks away from his father, the father does not distance himself from his son. He continues to love him even in his sinful and unrepentant state. It is a beautiful and important thing to remember that even when we show total disregard for God and his ways, his love for us is *never* withdrawn. It always surrounds us whether we see it or not. In other words, God is *never mad* at us. God hates sin, but he *always* loves the sinner. Our sin may break his heart just as the wayward behavior of a son or daughter will break the heart of his/her parents.

The son goes off and becomes totally irresponsible, a "waster" of the worst kind. He not only loses all his money but also his identity and self-respect. He no longer knows who he is.

Commenting on this parable, Fr. Henri Nouwen writes: "*The further I run away from where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved. And the less I hear the voice, the more I become*

entangled in the manipulation and power games of the world."

The prodigal son in us

All three characters in this story reside, to some extent, in each of us. The prodigal son is that part of us that is rebellious and irresponsible with the gifts God has placed in our lives. As Sr. Joan Chittister writes: "*The prodigal figure is at work in us when we go racing through the candy store of life, unaware of the price of the going and coming or the cost. We are takers who gather everything we can to ourselves, or squander it or do nothing, and then discover that life demands back everything it gives in ways we never dreamed.*"

The prodigal son is also that part of us that may have a hedonistic streak, that desires "wine, women and song," the playboy in us, the "eternal boy" who chases after toys of various kinds, the rebellious and immature part of us that does not want to grow up and be responsible for our lives, the part of us that made or makes poor choices, thereby creating a big mess for ourselves and others.

Conversion: coming to one's senses

Luke writes, "*Coming to his senses...*" This is a moment of initial conversion. The prodigal son has an awakening moment when he realizes all that he has lost, and he begins the long journey of conversion. I say "initial conversion" because it seems that his initial motive to want to come home is quite selfish: he is hungry. But he also seems to realize that he has sinned. "*I will go to my father's home and say: 'I have sinned against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.'*" Perhaps at some time in our lives, we have had a similar type of an awakening experience. We realize that we made some very poor choices or that we had been living a rebellious or promiscuous lifestyle that failed in every way to bring us happiness and peace. Then "coming to our senses," we see all that we have lost and we start the long journey home.

The father's loving embrace: the moment of mercy and reconciliation

Now we reach the high point of this story, the moment the father embraces his wayward son. "*While the son was a long way off, his father caught sight of him and*

was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced and kissed him.” Can we imagine the old man running down the road to embrace his son who must have looked like one of the homeless men we see on the streets. He did not say: “How could you have done this to me!” He is simply delighted that his son is back home. “Let the celebration begin because this son of mine who was lost has come back to life.”

Through all this, Jesus is saying to you and me: “This is how God feels about us when we, through sin, leave his presence, and through repentance, return to him.”

When people come to confession after being away for many years, I often say to them, “This day there is joy in heaven because of your presence here.” It is probably difficult for us to believe this. But that is what the parable is telling us. As one man puts it, “I always feel confident going to God with my sins, because forgiveness is God’s business. God’s job is to love me and forgive me.” How about that for a confident attitude! It is probably not easy for any of us to believe in our hearts in such a warm-hearted forgiving God, especially if we have never experienced much forgiveness in our human relationships. If we have a hard time believing in a God of mercy or have a hard time forgiving ourselves, we would do well to spend time just imagining ourselves in the loving embrace of God who knows our sins more than we do.

The resentful older brother

The older brother is anything but ready to join in the party and share in the father’s joy. Instead, he becomes “angry and refuses to enter the house.” He despises his younger, wayward brother and is mad with his father for killing the fatted calf in his brother’s honor. Those of us who have been dutiful sons or daughters probably identify very much with the feeling of the older brother. Yes, we might say: “Let the brother return home, but to bread and water, not to a fatted calf; in sack cloth, not a new robe; wearing ashes, not a ring; in tears, not in merriment; kneeling, not dancing. We may wonder if the party has cancelled out the seriousness of sin and repentance?” (Patricia Sanchez)

Scholars commenting on this part of the parable point out that the older son has also left his father’s house in an emotional and spiritual way. The father loves both of his sons equally but, unfortunately, the older son never feels appreciated. While he is a dutiful son, over the years he has become cold-hearted and judgmental. He even disowns his little brother, referring to him as “that son of yours.” He is unable to share in his father’s joy at the return of his younger son. So, both sons are wayward in their own way. Both have broken relationship with the father. The older son has become a foreigner in his

own home. Resentment now pervades his whole being. Notice how the father also reaches out to the older brother. He goes out to talk to him. He loves him just as much as he loves his younger son. *But sadly, the older son, lost in resentment, is unable to receive his father’s love.* Resentment and joy cannot co-exist. Resentment will always steal our joy. Henri Nouwen writes: *The father wants not only his younger son back, but his elder son as well. But will the son respond to his father’s plea or remain stuck in bitterness? This is not a story that separates the two brothers into the good one and the evil one. The father only is good. He loves both sons. He wants both to participate in his joy. “All I have is yours,” he says. This the father’s unreserved, unlimited love is offered wholly and equally. He does not compare the two sons. He expresses complete love according to their individual journeys.*”

In the parable, the older brother symbolizes the Pharisees and Scribes who keep the law but their hearts are not with God. Elsewhere in the Gospel, Jesus says of them: “This people serve me with their lips, but their hearts are far from them.” As one writer puts it, “They were lawless within the law.” Like the older brother, they are not happy when the tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners turn to Jesus. They were a lot like Jonah who hated to see the Ninevites repent and thereby gain God’s mercy. From the angle of the older brother, the real target of the parable is not the wayward sinners and their forgiveness by God but the self-righteous “saints” who begrudged God’s mercy to others.

When Luke was writing his Gospel 30 or 40 years later, the older brother symbolized those church leaders who did not want to receive back those who had lapsed during the persecution.

Moving to our own time, we can ask what part of us might the older brother symbolize? Sr. Joan Chittister answers that question in this way: “The older dutiful brother in us knows intuitively that life demands a price, and we pay it with a vengeance. We play by all the canons, keep all the rules, count all the points we amass and wait to be rewarded for doing exactly what we should be doing. When no one thanks us for being exactly what we are meant to be, we argue that life has not treated us justly, that God has abandoned us, that we have been overlooked and we live forever after with a bitter taste in our mouths for those whose lives, unlike our own, seem to be lived on wings and made of honey. There is in each of us, in other words, the irresponsible child as well as the self-righteous one. We throw responsibility to the wind in one breath and judge another for doing the same in the next. We are each the child who is squandering the treasure called life. We are each the child who is judging those who do not do life

as we do. We are each called to be the one who forgives the stumbling self and celebrates the efforts of the others.”

A God who loves the sinner but calls us to the hard work of conversion and repentance

Today’s parable could easily communicate to us an image of a God who is soft on sin. We may wonder if the father is too lenient with a son who has committed a terrible crime against him. Any of us could be easily tempted to stray if mercy were so easily had. So let’s look a little deeper. The following piece is by Fr. Paul Waddell, C.P., Professor of Ethics at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago.

Yes, indeed, the father is exultant that his son who was dead has come back to life, but it is also clear that he expects his son to leave his dissolute lifestyle behind. The son is welcomed home, but he is also expected to change (just as at Baptism, when every neophyte (newborn) Christian is clothed in Christ, not only that he/she might begin a new life of peace, truthfulness, justice and joy, but also that they may renounce a contrary life that is darkness, division, falsehood and gloom. The clothing of the prodigal son in the finest robe indicates not only a fresh start but also a break with destructive past. The father welcomes his son home not so that he can repeat the past, but that he can reconstruct the future in hope. The father’s wonderful show of mercy must be met by the son’s commitment to letting go his past and beginning to learn anew what it means to be a son. A son who is a drug addict is forgiven by his parents. But when he returns home he is expected to reform life and do the painful work of freeing his life from drugs.

The following are three more reflections on this marvelous parable.

Jesus as the Prodigal Son

Fr. Henri Nouwen’s book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, was inspired by Rembrandt’s painting of this parable. In the book, Nouwen has this piece as Jesus as the Prodigal Son.

I am touching here the mystery that Jesus himself became the prodigal son for our sake. He left the house of his heavenly Father, came to a foreign country, gave away all that he had, and returned through his cross to his Father’s home. All of this he did, not as a rebellious son, but as the obedient son, sent out to bring home all the lost children of God. Jesus, who told the story to those who criticized him for associating with sinners, himself lived the long and painful journey that he describes.

When I began to reflect on the parable and Rembrandt’s portrayal of it, I never thought of the exhausted young man with the face of a newborn baby as Jesus. But now, after so many hours of intimate contemplation, I feel blessed by this vision. Isn’t the broken young man kneeling before his father the “Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world”? Isn’t he the innocent one who became sin for us? Isn’t he the one who didn’t “cling to his equality with God,” but “became as human beings are?” Isn’t he the sinless Son of God who cried out on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus is the prodigal son of the prodigal Father who gave away everything the Father had entrusted to him so that I could become like him and return with him to his Father’s home.

Seeing Jesus himself as the prodigal son goes far beyond the traditional interpretation of the parable. Nonetheless, this vision holds a great secret. I am gradually discovering what it means to say that my sonship and the sonship of Jesus are one, that my return and the return of Jesus are one, that my home and the home of Jesus are one. There is no journey to God outside of the journey that Jesus made. The one who told the story of the prodigal son in the Word of God, “through whom all things came into being.” He “became flesh, lived among us” and made us part of his fullness.

Once I look at the story of the prodigal son with the eyes of faith, the “return” of the prodigal becomes the return of the Son of God who has drawn all people into himself and brings them home to his heavenly Father. As Paul says: “God wanted all fullness to be found in him and through him to reconcile all things to him, everything in heaven and everything on earth.”

A parable revealing hearts

Reflecting on this story, Fr. Flor McCarthy, S.D.B., writes:

The story of the Prodigal Son is a story about hearts: selfish hearts and generous hearts, closed hearts and open hearts, cold hearts and warm hearts, broken hearts and joyful hearts, unrepentant hearts and repentant hearts, unforgiving hearts and forgiving hearts, resentful hearts and grateful hearts.

It reveals so much about the vagaries of the human heart. When all is said and done, it is the heart that matters. How can one sum up the heart? The heart is what I am deep down. It is the real me. Darkness of heart is the blackest night of all. Emptiness of heart is the greatest poverty of all. A heavy heart is the most wearisome burden of all. A broken heart is the deepest wound of all.

But the parable reveals how steadfast is the heart of God. God's heart doesn't blow hot and cold. God never closes his heart to any of his children. No matter how far from home they may wander, no matter what they do, if they come home, the one thing they can be sure of is a warm and generous welcome.

A final comment by Fr. Emeric Lawrence, O.S.B.

The whole story is about us—about humanity in general and each of us in particular. Maybe our departure from our father's house has not been so dramatic, not the results so painful. There are degrees and degrees of alienation. But God, our Father, takes risks with us, just as the father in the parable did. It's a risk he takes because, despite all our imperfections, he never gives up believing in us and trusting us to come through, if not right away, then eventually. That's why he gives us Lent, year after year. It may also be the reason why he gave us the Sacrament of Reconciliation."

Reflection questions

- ◆ Where do you find yourself in this story? Which character do you find yourself most drawn to emotionally?
- ◆ Are you carrying a resentment which is stealing your joy? How willing are you to look at this for the rest of Lent? Do something about it so that Easter joy can be yours.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Emeric