

## Commentary to the 4th Sunday of Lent C

### The Prodigal Son and Beyond



This Sunday we have the parable of the Prodigal Son, or, as it is sometimes called, the Parable of the Forgiving Father. I have even heard the last part of the parable referred to as the Parable of the Elder Brother.

When we call the parable the Prodigal Son, we focus on the younger brother. We consider his sins, his memory of his life with the father whom he offended, and his decision to return back to his father even if he were only to be treated as a servant instead of as a son. There are many, many times I'm sorry to say, that I have felt the way the prodigal did on his journey back home. Perhaps you have too. There are times that we all have recognized our sins, recognized how happy we were before we got mired in our own selfishness, and decided to do all we can to return to at least a small portion of that happiness. We are not seeking to be restored to mystic ecstasy. We just want to be on our father's farm again,

happy to be in His Presence, no matter how limited that Presence might be. And then we are welcomed back with more love, more joy, than we could have ever expected.

When we focus on the Forgiving Father, we recognize that the father was not concerned with how He was offended, he was concerned about his son who was lost, lost from the father's world. We focus on the father's joy at seeing His Son approaching and seeking forgiveness. We are ecstatic that our Father wants to restore us to His Love and forgives us before we can even spit out our "Bless me Father for I have sinned."

Our consideration of the Elder Brother usually leads us to recognize that the Father's forgiveness of the sinner has to be embraced by all. When we decide that someone should not be restored to the Father's love, we are in fact excluding ourselves from the Banquet of Love.

So, those are our normal themes. We can get deeper though. There is something sinister at foot within us. There is a part of us that gives a bit of credibility to the other side. After all, the younger son had a right to his inheritance. Was it really so wrong that he asked for it early? What he did with it was his business. Or we might think that the elder son had a great point. He's been the good one, working to support his father. Why shouldn't he be upset that his brother, who caused his father so much pain, should return and be welcomed so warmly? There is a part of us, squirreled away in some hidden hole of our brain, that in similar circumstances wants to say, "Good riddance to bad rubbish." We might even question the actions of the Father, thinking that he caused the heartache by giving in to the brat. Now he was going overboard in welcoming him home. Some part of us wants to say that real people would never do that. That's the part of us that thinks we have a right to hold a grudge.

Those thoughts occur to us to the degree that our commitment to Christ is weak. They would not occur if we were totally sold out for the Lord. The parts of us that think that the prodigal son had a right to demand his inheritance and do what he wanted with his money are those parts that don't consider our own responsibility for the gifts of Love we have received from the Lord. The prodigal saw no obligation towards love or even justice and, as one of our teenagers said, "He ditched his father." When we decide it's time to take care of "Number One," we are consumed by our own selfishness. But if we are grounded in the Lord, we will use whatever gifts he has given us to praise Him with our lives. Our inheritance is Jesus Christ. He gives us His Love so that we can give this love to others.

Those parts of us that think the elder brother was correct are also those parts of us that are not fully committed to Christ. Justice had been served. The elder brother still owned the rest of the farm.

“Whatever I have is yours,” the father told him. He wasn’t told to give a portion of his share of the farm to his brother. He was just asked to welcome the sinner back into the family. He couldn’t because he was not grounded in the Lord’s love. Nor are we when we become so judgmental that we also exclude ourselves from the banquet of God’s love. For example, we might have a good friend or a close relative who was gravely hurt by a spouse or a child. We hurt with them. Then the offender returns and, to our dismay, is forgiven and welcomed back. We think, “That is ridiculous.” “He did that to you and you are letting him back into your heart?” we protest. Our friend says, “Can’t you just be happy for me?” But we won’t. And we remove ourselves from the banquet of Christ’s joy.

Finally, the part of us that gives a little credence to the thought that the forgiving father was all too forgiving, is that part of us that is so selfish it considers every action as it impacts on ourselves. It takes courage and a commitment to Jesus Christ to say that my pain is not important. The pain of others is what matters. That is what Jesus did on the Cross. That is what He calls us to do when He says, “Follow me.”

Our God loves us. No sacred book other than the Bible proclaims the love of God or a god for his people. The prophet Hosea predicted that the people would luxuriate in the Love of God. And then Jesus came. His whole life was a statement of Love, love for the Father, love for us. His death was a proclamation of this love. “Is this enough for you?” he asks the mystic Julian of Norwich. He was saying, “If you need more, I will do more.” Of course, it is enough. We live under the mercy of God, under the compassion of God. We live in the Love of Jesus Christ.

The parable of the Prodigal Son, Forgiving Father or Elder Brother, whatever, is calling us to reflect on the depth of our own commitment to the Lord, and our own determination to live His Love.

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