

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Mar 10th 2013

We are always trying to position ourselves to be in a posture of receptivity. We are, by nature, grabbers and also human-doers and we do follow Adam and Eve by earning our bread by the sweat of our brows. During these days of Lent we pray to return to the Source of life and accept the truth that we have received the very lives we have.

We desire to return to the ground or land or home from which we have wandered. The Eucharist is that Home, that resting place where we are welcomed again, prodigal though we may be. We renew the divine embrace and we pledge once more to live more generously the embrace we receive.

REFLECTION

Joshua has taken over the leadership of the people of Israel and has led them for all these years of their wandering in the desert. They do arrive in their new land which is flowing with abundance.

Because of their years of slavery in Egypt and the forty-year pilgrimage in the desert, those men born during these years were not circumcised. Circumcision was the physical sign of agreement or acceptance of the covenant made with Abraham years before. This not being circumcised was the “reproach of Egypt”, because the men of Egypt were not circumcised. At their entering of the new and holy land then, they paused and had the men more fully enter the Jewish traditions and practices.

At that time then, they celebrated as full members of the Jewish people, the great Passover in remembrance of their being freed from slavery. There is an ending of the raining down of manna and the beginning of the eating from the produce from their new abundant land. God had been faithful to the covenant by freeing them, feeding them, and now they were to earn their bread from the sweat of their brows and the fertility of the land.

The Gospel is a wonderful parable open to all kinds of questions, answers, and self-reflections. The context or setting of Jesus’ relating this last of three parables about losing and finding, is central to the importance of all three parables which make up this whole chapter. The Pharisees and scribes began to complain, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So it is exactly and directly to them that

Jesus tells this story about two sons.

One son, the younger, in a sense, the newer to the family, is a selfish, greedy, rebellious fellow. The elder son, one who came first, has done all things well, “Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders.” The Pharisees certainly knew with whom Jesus was comparing them. As the father welcomed back the disobedient son, so the “sinners” are welcomed by Jesus and eats with them as do the father and his household eat with the welcomed-back son.

The elder son does not want to have anything to do with the household, the younger son, or the celebration. The Pharisees, who hear in the parable whom they represent, stand at a distance and judge the entire gathering of Jesus and his company of sinners. The father recalls to his elder son that they have always been together and in love have shared in everything. “You were never lost,” the father tells him, “but your brother was dead and gone, but now he has returned.” There is always the welcome back of God. Jesus is expressing that God never separates from even the worst sinner. The father had gone out each day to see if the younger son had come to his senses, and the son had done just that. Sitting with the pigs and their messiness, the son looks around, smells around and wakes up. Remember, pigs, to the Jewish religious sensitivities were the worst things with which to associate. He talks himself back to his truest identity, that he is a son of a loving father. He makes the very natural statement that he no longer should be any more regarded as who he once was, the son. He rises and prepares to talk his way back into - not sonship - but one who will work for his bread by the sweat of his brow.

The rest of the story is Jesus-wise predictable. The theme of course is that Jesus is the Redeemer and not the Approver or Excluder. The Pharisees are the disapprovers and excluders and Jesus is putting Himself in direct opposition to them and their ways.

One interpretation of this parable is that each of us combines both sons in our oneness. The elder part of us is ordered, strict, obedient, logical, exact, dutiful, and pleased with our own good works. We have the proper tickets. The younger part of us is inconsistent, envious, wanderous, self-satisfying, independent, and stubborn. We are quite a war within. Our elder-side would like to tie down tightly the younger-side. Our self-righteousness does not want that looser side to be seen by anybody. It wants to appear better than it knows itself to be. The elder-side judges everything it does or thinks and is quite unhappy with the internal tensions.

The younger-side does eventually come to its senses. The emptiness of trying to build himself, achieve himself, indulge himself renders him senseless about his true self. The emptiness of whatever pigpen

he lands in moves him up and out and back to his true home. We live in that tension then between the self-righteous and the self-redeemed-by-Christ. Those who live severely judging others are victimized by their own self-centered severity. Those who are forgiven, tend to be forgiving of others.

So are we in or out? We are welcomed, invited, embraced, but both sons had to respond freely. It is not easy to be welcomed in when we are a bit outside of ourselves. It is truly humbling to want to be perfect and yet in order to be admitted into the welcome-home banquet, we have to admit ourselves back into our true, fragmented selves.

I have fun imagining how the tax collectors and other sinners, sitting with Jesus and actually eating with him, heard this parable and called to the Pharisees, who were also intently listening to the parable, to get real. “Come and have something good to eat with us, you don’t need tickets, and if you have to, go ahead and wash your hands.”

“You must rejoice, my son, for your brother was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.”

Larry Gillick, S.J.