

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Luke 15:1–3, 11–32. This text contains the famous parable of the Prodigal Son. As you read this parable, you will note that there are three primary persons who are the protagonists at different points of the story —the younger son, the father, and the older son. This parable is literally the heart of Luke’s Gospel. It gains greater importance by being placed in the middle of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and as the culmination of three parables of divine mercy (the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin being the previous two in Lk 15:4-10). The importance of this parable warrants our prayerful consideration. At various moments we may have been like any one of these primary figures.

The initial three verses of this Sunday’s Gospel reading tell us that the Pharisees and Scribes complained because Jesus was welcoming sinners and eating with them. This context is very important and must be remembered in order to properly interpret and apply the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

To share a meal in the ancient world was more than just a way to satisfy hunger. It was a way in which people shared their lives and celebrated relationship among the participants. The English word “companion” communicates this meaning since it is derived from the two Latin words *cum* (“with”) and *panis* (“bread”) and refers to a person with whom we share bread (meal). The objection of the Pharisees and Scribes, then, was focused on the fact that Jesus was becoming friends with people who were regarded as sinners. This action of Jesus was scandalous and unacceptable to the Pharisees and Scribes because they believed it was honorable to separate oneself from those who were considered less holy. Jesus teaches us that God desires reconciliation and the conversion of others. In fact, God not only values openness to a sinner’s conversion but actually takes initiative in seeking that conversion.

The Pharisees and scribes may have welcomed sinners to their table at some point but only when those sinners had proven themselves worthy of such an honor. Jesus teaches us that God honors those who reach out to reconcile and welcome the wayward rather than waiting for them to first correct their lives before they receive our love and attention.

The attitude of the Pharisees and Scribes can be divisive in a community because it creates a world in which some people see themselves as better than others and restrict their associations to those whom they consider like themselves. Of course, others who are deemed unworthy are excluded from such associations. Rather than facilitating or encouraging conversion, such a divisive and condemnatory attitude actually frustrates and impedes conversion.

Jesus came to seek out and save what was lost and He expects His disciples to assist Him in that effort. This passage challenges us to examine our attitudes and judgments of others so as to take initiative in seeking their conversion rather than frustrating it. The fact that the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to listen to Jesus indicates that they were receiving our Lord’s word and becoming disciples with a corresponding change of life. Such a delicate moment of grace needs nurturing, encouragement and acceptance lest it perish from indifference or be crushed by rejection.

The receptivity of the tax collectors and sinners who draw near to Jesus and hear Him (a sign of their conversion) stands in sharp contrast to that of the Pharisees and scribes who watch and murmur – a reference to the Israelites who murmured against God’s actions as carried out by Moses and Aaron in the desert of the Exodus. Now they murmur against Jesus as He demonstrates God’s merciful reconciliation to those who are lost. The judgmental arrogance of the Pharisees and scribes becomes greater when we realize that the term “sinners” could include those members of society who did have the leisure and resources to follow all the observances of ritual purity, which were extensive, and not only those who had violated the Ten Commandments. Those least able to follow the observances of ritual purity were mostly the poor and uneducated.

As you think about the differences in attitude expressed by Jesus and the Pharisees, how are you challenged to reconsider some of your own attitudes and values towards others?

When has someone’s acceptance, encouragement and friendship helped you change your life in a positive way?

Who is waiting for you to take initiative and reach out to them?

How can a faith community experience division because of the judgmental attitudes of some members?

Who are the people who are commonly considered sinners today?

The first person in this parable is that of the younger son. He receives so much but also ignores so much. He was rich in the respect of others, a secure position, a family, and a father who loved him. He chooses to break those family ties and abandons both location and relationship as he travels to a foreign land far away from those who love him. In doing so, he was treating his father as though he were already dead.

Eventually he squanders his inheritance on his self-centeredness and foolish pursuits. Finally, after he hits rock bottom and is lower than the pigs, that is he longs to eat the food that fills their stomachs, he decides it’s time to come home. His motivations are part self-interest and part response to grace inspiring him to once again desire the life he previously enjoyed. He has not just lost his possessions; he has actually lost a part of his identity because of his alienation.

In coming to his senses (literally, “he came to himself”), he recalls the relationship he once had. He also realizes that his offence has not just injured his relationship with his family but has also offended God (“sinned against heaven and before you”). He’s still partially motivated by his own hunger as well as a desire for reconciliation and relationship with his father.

In his prepared speech he intends to express his request to be treated as a servant rather than a son. Maybe he’s embarrassed to come back as a son because he knows that he doesn’t deserve that honor. Maybe he’s trapped in his guilt and now believes himself only worthy of being a servant. He did “come to himself” so he does remember his former life and wants to return to it. It may be an impure motivation, but it’s a start! In fact, it’s enough to change his course and start the process of conversion.

Repentance for the younger son means learning to say “Father” again. In using the word “Father”, the younger son shows that he does, in fact, desire reconciliation more than recompense.

The example of the younger son has much to say to us as disciples. Sometimes we can find ourselves losing our identity because we have gradually drifted away from a loving relationship with our Father in Heaven. Or perhaps we feel that we are alienated and in a foreign land where no one cares for our needs. For each of us, there is a point of awakening when we realize our need to return and restore the relationship we have lost. The emptiness and hunger of the stomach is nothing compared to the emptiness and hunger for love, acceptance, and forgiveness experienced by the human heart in such moments.

Sometimes we don’t know how to find our way home to the Father. It is in those moments especially that the example of the Prodigal Son should inspire us. We have only to get up, go and ask to be a member of the Father’s family once again. Our words don’t have to be perfect. God will work with our imperfect and even impure motivations because the Father desires to restore relationship with us more than we could ever imagine.

What positive growth has taken place in your life because of some difficult struggle or painful situation you faced?

Who were the many people who helped you along the way to recover your sense of self and restore your dignity?

By asking his share of the property and then selling it while his father was still living, the younger son was basically saying to the father that he was already “dead” to him. How do people today treat others as though they are already dead?

What emptiness or hunger leads people to seek God?

What can cause people to think they are unworthy of relationship with God?

The second person in this parable is the father. He is someone who is described as “moved with compassion”. Notice how active his love is as he “sees”, “feels”, “runs”, “embraces,” and “kisses” the younger son. The father’s compassion reaches out to proactively welcome his son home. He goes to meet him half way on his journey which is an important image for us as we aspire to imitate the fathers love.

One particular note of interest is how he sees the younger son from afar and “runs” to greet him. It was considered foolish and shameful for adults to run in the cultural world of Jesus. This detail is telling us that the Father is even willing to be seen as foolish by others when it comes to loving his son.

When the younger son starts his rehearsed speech, the father stops him after he says what is true but before he can say what is self-serving. The father doesn’t want a servant; he always valued the relationship with his son and that’s what he wants once again. He is not embarrassed to love his son. In fact, he throws a public feast to announce to the whole town that he has his child back!

It's also important to note that the father's mercy extends to both sons and not just one. We see the father go out to the older son just as he had done for the younger son. The father reaches out to all his lost and wayward children to bring them back regardless of the reason for their alienation. The example of the father's mercy and active love has much to say to us as disciples who are called to express that same mercy towards others. Some scripture scholars refer to this as the parable of the "Merciful Father" rather than the "Prodigal Son" for this reason.

Who has played the role of the "Merciful Father" in your life by calling you back to your authentic self?

When have you helped restore someone's dignity by your love and forgiveness?

How can people be considered "foolish" because of their active loving desire to reconcile with someone who has strayed?

Sometimes it can be easy for us to wait until others come to us before we are willing to reconcile with them. The father in this parable met his repentant son half way. What can you do to meet someone half way in his or her journey of repentance?

The third person in this parable is the older brother who will not join the celebration with the father and will not even come into the same room as his younger brother. In fact, he will not use the terms "brother" or "Father" in his discourse. The older brother is judgmental, angry, and condemnatory in stark contrast to the father who is loving, merciful, and forgiving. In the older brother we see that both sons were alienated from the father: one relationally (older brother) and the other physically (younger brother).

The older brother reveals the source of his judgmental attitude when he describes his relationship to the father as that of a slave (which is even less than servant). For the older brother, life is about following rules rather than rejoicing in relationship. In saying that he has never violated the father's commandments, he is expressing the attitude of the Pharisees in Luke 15:1-2 who do not believe they need to repent. Because of that attitude of self-righteousness, the older brother wants to make others earn mercy, and so he seeks retribution for other's mistakes, wrongdoings, and failures.

The older brother also reveals an interesting characteristic when he comments about how the father never gave him so much as a kid goat to celebrate with his friends. It is important to note that his desire was not to celebrate with the father but with his friends. Thus, the older son was more concerned with reward (kid goat) than he was with relationship with his father.

His refusal to join in the banquet didn't stop the celebration; rather the older son's refusal just prevented him from sharing the joy of the father. He is like the Pharisees who stand outside condemning Jesus for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. The older brother is not interested in conversion, reconciliation, relationship, or forgiveness. For him, life is about following the rules, getting what you deserve, and finding fault with others. For this reason, some scripture scholars refer to this parable as the story of the "Unforgiving Brother". The older brother's judgmental attitude is manifested by his readiness to point out the graphic nature of the

younger son's sins. In doing so, he was condemning the younger son and refusing to recognize or cooperate with his desire for conversion.

Not only does the older son not want the father's love, the older son is actually angry at and resentful of the father's mercy. Repentance for the older son will mean learning to say "Brother" again. This example of the older brother has much to say to us. Sometimes we can find ourselves demonstrating a self-righteous attitude like that of the older brother. In those moments, we need to remember that Jesus calls us to be people who help reconcile with Him and not people who make it more difficult for others to change their lives by constantly reminding them of the wrong they have done or by denying our relationship with them as brothers and sisters in the Family of God.

The spiritual author Henry Nouwen wrote a moving reflection on this parable entitled, The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming (Darton, Longman and Todd. London, 1991). This book would be a wonderful resource of prayer as part of your Lenten spiritual reading.

Sometimes people who have been away from the Church for a long time can be hesitant to return because they feel like others would not welcome them back. What can a faith community do to manifest the Father's Mercy more readily and visibly — especially towards those who desire to turn their lives around?

How can people be resentful of God's mercy today?

How can people today pursue a life of faith based on a desire for reward rather than relationship?

When do you find yourself living your faith as a set of rules to be followed rather than a loving relationship with God to be honored and respected?

How does resentment cause people to miss out on the joy of God's mercy?

For whom do you need to learn to say "Brother" or "Sister" again?

How can people make it difficult for others to repent and change their lives?