

Today's Gospel has been called the greatest short story ever written. Today we heard the story of the prodigal son, or maybe the story about the jealous and unforgiving son and brother, or maybe the story about the merciful and forgiving father, it really depends upon your prospective of the Word of God.

Have you ever made a choice in your life similar to the one of the youngest son? Have you ever, after having made that choice, realized that it wasn't the smartest move you have ever made? Well, if you have, welcome to the club. The youngest son in today's Gospel thought he was making the right decision at that time in his life. He attached himself to a Gentile, a disgrace for a Jew; he is reduced to feeding swine, an occupation forbidden by the law. Added to this, he is so hungry, he longs to eat what the pigs eat. I think we can all agree that at that point he knew his decision didn't rank up there as one of his best. At this point in his life, what did he decide to do? He decided to return to his Father and beg for forgiveness. He knew that his fathers hired help were better off than he was. He wanted to return to his father and brother, not as a son and brother but as a hired hand. He felt that he did not deserve to be called a son

by his father. What does his story illustrate for us? His story illustrates the meaning of the sacrament of penance, and Lent is an appropriate season to celebrate the sacrament of penance. The young son's repentance is our model. After having squandered his inheritance, he came to his senses. He prepared to confess his sins and to make an act of contrition. Before asking to be forgiven, he resolved to change his life.

In an earlier era of the Church, people confessed their sins to the Bishop on Ash Wednesday. Sackcloth was given to them and ashes were sprinkled on their heads, and their names were entered into the book of penitents. The Bishop assigned a penance, which was to be performed during the entire season of Lent. This is one of those times when we don't wish for the good old days. The penance assigned was suited to the sin. If a person was greedy and selfish, they were required to give alms to the poor. If they were self indulgent, they were directed to abstain from choice foods. The purpose of the penance was to affect a change of heart.

The parables Jesus used are a marvelous witness to the incarnation, for they reveal an understanding of God and the kingdom of God, from ordinary circumstances

of life. I read a while ago about a sixteen year had gone missing for nearly a month when she called home from the near by bus station and asked if someone would come and pick her up. She refused to say where she had been, and her Mother said she had lost a lot of weight. Her parents had feared, while she was gone, that she might have been harmed in some way, and were very relieved to have her home. Her mother said she felt like the weight of the world had been lifted off of her shoulders. She said she thought her heart was going to quit when they got the phone call; she could hardly breathe and ran out of the house without her car keys. What does that story have to do with the Gospel? Well, the mother, to me, sounds a lot like the father in the Gospel. They were both so excited that then ran out of the house to get their children. We all know someone else who is just like that? God is like that. God is like a mother, who when her runaway daughter calls from the bus station runs out of the house breathless, and so overjoyed she forgets her keys. That is what God is like. God does not sit on a faraway throne waiting for us to come back. God runs out to meet us, like the father in the parable, and the mother in the story. When we

approach God, he does not sit back and wait, he rushes to us and embraces us to welcome us home.

The elder son in the parable seems a bit self-righteous.

He kept all the rules. He has served his father faithfully.

But his attitude is one of anger, resentment, and

bitterness. We sometimes meet elder sons quite often.

They are seemingly righteous people, but people so

possessed with the perceived failings of others that it is

disturbing to be around them. If there is one thing that

characterizes the elder son it is an absence of joy. The

father had to plead with him to rejoice. Why is joy

absent from the elder son and from ourselves at times?

Our lack of joy may come from our refusal to see that in

many ways we are also like the youngest son. Like the

daughter in the story, we may have run away at times,

perhaps even approached spiritual death. In some ways

we could have squandered our inheritance as sons and

daughters of God. Each of us may have missed the mark

and may feel we have, for now, failed to achieve fully the

purpose for which we were created. And yet, every time

we turn back to God, every time we approach Him, God

runs out to meet us. God is waiting for our phone call,

He is waiting to see us on the horizon. He waits in

anticipation, and when the call from us is made, through the Sacrament of reconciliation, God runs out to meet us, like the mother in the story, and the father in the Gospel, with open arms to welcome us home. When was the last time you took advantage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation? When was the last time you felt God's arms around you welcoming you home? On Tuesday nights here, (at), St. Brigid in addition to the Holy Hour from 6-7, Fr. Dan is here for reconciliation. Come back and feel the warmth of Gods' love.