

The Prodigal Son and the Boundless Mercy of God
4th Sunday of Lent
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You may find this hard to believe, but almost 45 years ago, I was a long haired, rebellious teenager. I attended college, but was more interested in my girlfriend, rock 'n roll music and staying out late than I was in academics. I disagreed with my parents about everything. My parents were fed up with my behavior and issued an ultimatum: Either start seeing things our way, or find a new place to live! So there I was with little education or financial resources, a part-time job, a girlfriend who told me I was brilliant and misunderstood, and a decision to make: Should I stay and give in to their demands, or should I reject them and strike out on my own? I was young and impulsive, and thought the decision was easy: I left the next morning!

By the way, if you're interested in what my mode of transportation was, it was my thumb. I hitchhiked everywhere!

About 15 months later, after landing a job that barely paid the rent, I brilliantly married that girlfriend. A year later, a couple months before my 21st birthday, we had a daughter. Over the next few years, I moved from job to job trying to support the family. And then, before my daughter turned six, my marriage ended in divorce. I was heartbroken and devastated, but found myself making another decision about a year later. You see, over the preceding seven or eight years, I had learned that I needed an education to move ahead in my life, but getting it was a huge challenge. My employer offered to pay for my books and tuition, but I needed a place to live. My next phone call was rather awkward and went something like this: "Hi Dad. Yeah, it's me. I'm going back to college and I need a place to live. Would it be okay if I moved into your house for a couple years?"

Is that a Prodigal Son story or what? I'll bet that many of us have similar stories, some as parents others as children. But even if we don't have a lived experience of it, there is something about the story of the Prodigal Son that is profoundly relatable.

If we think about it a little, there are times in our lives when each of us experiences being the father, the older son and the younger son in this story. Focusing on the father, can you imagine what he thought when his son asked him for his inheritance? The request is an insult that basically says, "Dad, you're already dead to me!" Imagine how you'd feel if your children or grandchildren asked you today for their inheritance. How would you feel? In my case, the answer is simple. I've already told my children that I plan to die about five minutes AFTER my

last nickel is spent! So whether they ask for it now or later, the amount they'll get is going to be the same. Nothing! But seriously, how would any of us feel if that happened to us? I'm sure that I'd feel offended and hurt. But the father in the story agrees to his son's outrageous request. He may not agree with his son's decision, but he doesn't interfere with his free will.

Now what about the older son, the one who has done everything right and followed all the rules. Many of us can probably relate to his situation. We go to church on Sunday, give to the poor and we're kind to strangers. And then we think about that rich uncle or brother-in-law, or that woman we went to high school with, none of whom could find their way to church on a bet. And they're getting all the goodies! They have the big house, the big car and the best job! Isn't it natural to ask, "Hey God, why do they get the easy life, while all I get are the crumbs?" That's where the older brother is. He's stuck in having done all the right things, without necessarily having done those things for the right reasons. Do we obey God's laws because we are his slaves or we think we can earn salvation, or because we love him and long to be in relationship with him now and for eternity?

What about the younger son? How many of us have forgotten about God for a time in our lives? It's common in our teens, or when we head off to college, to start feeling that faith isn't all that important or relevant. Or perhaps when we get married and have children, we're tired at the end of the weekend and it becomes such a hassle to get the little ones ready for church that we tell ourselves it's really not that important. Or maybe we just get to a point where we're enjoying the good things in life and we let our relationship with God take a back seat to everything else. And then it happens. Just like the prodigal son, we hit rock bottom: we lose a job, suffer a serious illness, or experience the death of a parent or the death of a relationship. When that happens and we remember that everything we have is gift, we then return to God and ask for his forgiveness. The beautiful reality is that he is always there with open arms, waiting and wanting to forgive us. He's like the father in the story: He sees us returning to him from far off and he runs to us, embraces us and welcomes us back into his family. That is how merciful God is to all of us.

Now, if you were wondering if my Dad actually welcomed me to live in his house when I went back to college, the answer is yes. There were no conditions, no strings attached. He was a real agent of God's mercy when I needed it the most. And 20 years later, in late 2005, we were blessed by being able to take my father into our home for about six weeks and nurse him back to health after he nearly died while visiting us here in CA. That was such a blessing for our entire family. As he prepared to fly back home to Michigan, he said he didn't know how to thank

us for our love and hospitality. I assured him that he had blessed us beyond measure by his mere presence.

The father in the parable shows boundless mercy to his sons. Pope Francis has called on each of us in this Jubilee Year of Mercy, to show that same boundless mercy to all of our brothers and sisters. Perhaps now is the time for us to ask ourselves, “Who is the prodigal son or daughter in my life who needs to experience God’s mercy? Who is the older brother that I need to encourage to join our celebration? How can I extend God’s mercy to them?”

Whether it’s a relative who has hurt our feelings or broken our hearts, Pope Francis is inviting us to forgive them and do our best to repair those relationships. We are also invited to reach out to strangers who truly need to feel God’s mercy. God has given us a free will and he won’t force us to do anything. But he *invites* us to share his love by being agents of his boundless mercy to all those we meet.

Mercy is powerful. It opens doors to *other* people’s hearts and frees us to share the infinite love that God gives us unconditionally. It opens *our* hearts to live with genuine compassion for our brothers and sisters regardless of their race, color or creed. That is what God has for us: *Boundless Mercy*. It is what the father shared with the prodigal son. It is what my Dad shared with me. The question is, “Are we open to sharing that same Boundless Mercy with all those we meet?” Perhaps our prayer for the last half of Lent and the balance of the Jubilee Year of Mercy should be something like this:

“Heavenly Father, open our hearts and inspire us to be agents of your Boundless Mercy to all those we meet, wherever we go.” Amen?