

Fourth Sunday of Lent Year "C" – Part 13

Jesus was a masterful, spellbinding teacher. Who else ever taught with such gravity and through stories? Once they went to arrest him, and he arrested them with his words. "Why didn't you bring him to us?" the religious leaders asked the Temple guards. "Because no one ever spoke like this man" the guards replied. (John 7:46).

Jesus' captivating style was his persona. His personality was gentle and compassionate, yet authoritative. When he spoke, his genius was manifested in his parables and stories about real life. The story about the prodigal son, only told in Luke, was arguably his finest. Here we are given insight into Jesus' creative imagination and his uncanny insight into humanity. This account as well as so many other parables he told were originals. None of these narratives are found elsewhere in antiquity. Jesus drew lessons from farmers, fishermen, businessmen, and real life. This, as well as his plentiful other stories, demonstrates his keen sensitivity and relevancy. He listened to life, and it paid off. He knew the human heart and its propensity towards wanderlust. He also knew about a parent's love. The story of the prodigal son is applicable to all of us in some manner, whether we are a parent, someone struggling with his/her image of God, or a person who is religiously set in his ways.

What often is not stated about this story is that it is directed towards the Pharisees and scribes. The religious leaders had been murmuring because sinners and tax collectors were drawing near to listen to Jesus. It was to the religious leaders that he directed three stories: one about a lost sheep, another about a lost coin, and a third about a lost son who was found. Jesus' point was that, instead of their murmuring about his outreach to outcasts, they should have been out looking and searching for the lost.

Jesus taught that it is the sick who need a doctor. In this parable, Jesus masterfully ended up including their rigid resistance and envy as he talked about the older son who was angry and envious. The oldest son in the parable refers to all religious people who stand in judgment of others and exclude them. Instead of neglecting them, we should be looking for ways to reach out to them.

Jesus takes on religious hypocrisy when he talks about the angry older son. The religious leaders were envious of Jesus but would not admit it. How dare prostitutes and tax collectors be favored over their own meticulous religious observance? Like Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, they were more worried about religious ritual than they were about people. While surfacing their false notions, Jesus compassionately also reached out even to them. They, too, are sons, and all the Father had was theirs. They, too, were invited to the party, but it is left up in the air whether or not they will come. In the parable, that choice was left hanging. That is because the choice is for those of us who hear the parable. Will we come to the celebration, yes or no?

The heart of the story, however, is about the younger son and his irreverent loose living, as well as his wise, patient father. The son made a move, and the father welcomed him.

You Can Change

In a nutshell, Lent is a season of change. Jesus preached about personal change and ongoing conversion is at the heart of his message. Jesus' first message in Mark was: "Repent." That word in the Greek means to have a change of mind.

Here is the key truth of the parable: it was only when the son suffered and encountered the problem of hunger and lack of funds that he "came to his senses." Be well aware that: if the money had not run out and the son did not have to slop with the pigs in the mud, the younger son would never have returned home.

We all have problems, but there is a silver lining in every cloud. To be promoted to the next grade in school, you must be able to grapple with and solve problems.

To be promoted in life and change for the good, you must face your problems and wrestle with them. Are you facing a problem right now? Challenges can make champions. Sometimes it is the difficulties, problems, and troubles in life that help define us and make us better.

Problems demand solutions, and when it comes to addictions of any sort, challenges, and problems, solutions can be found. Change comes as we seek the solution. The solution for someone who has bottomed out through loose living or someone who has been confronted about their addictive behavior through an intervention is to stop the defective behavior and live another way.

The solution for the young man in the parable who was broke and hungry was to return to his father. Granted, it was something he was ashamed to do, but the problem was so dire he had nowhere else to go. Often the solution stares us in the face and, to change, we must be humble enough to admit the truth. If you want to change, first, you must admit that you have a problem, sin, or addiction and then make a move. If you deny, try to escape, or are not willing to confront your issues, you will never change. It takes courage and grace to change.

The Father

Some scholars call this parable the parable of the prodigal father. The word prodigal means extravagant, lavish, and reckless. Certainly, the son was reckless when he squandered his inheritance by living large. But, in another way, the father was reckless by wisely letting his son leave and extravagant in his love by waiting for him and welcoming him back with open arms.

Many people suffer with an image of God who is calculating, harsh, punitive, and out to get you if you make a mistake. God is almighty, awesome, and terrible in his deeds. There will be a Day of Judgment. Yet, we read, mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:13). More than harsh and calculating, God is compassionate and loving.

The story about the prodigal father addresses such skewed images of God. In fact, Jesus, in this account, gives us the most profound and gracious image for God found in the entire Bible. God is a father who is deeply affectionate towards us and has patient concern about us. We see the father waiting for the son to return. God's patience gives us time to make mistakes, decide anew, and make a move. 2 Peter 3:15 tells us to count God's patience as salvation. Peter means that God is giving us time so that we will make the appropriate changes and come to salvation. Some may misconstrue this patience of God as God's absence or even nonexistence. This misrepresentation of God's gracious gift of time for our benefit is a totally negative and a wrong way of representing God.

Once the son does make a move, even before the son can get his rehearsed confession out of his mouth, the father compassionately runs to him (undignified for a Jewish man) and hugs and kisses him. In this show of affection, Jesus is saying that we have a God who patiently waits for our return. When we finally do make a move, he meets us more than halfway. God runs to us, hugs us, and kisses us. He does not care so much about what we have done wrong, but rather that we have returned.

"But wait, there is more." Now comes the festive announcement: "Bring quickly the finest robe, put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet (symbols of membership in the family and freedom); and bring the fatted calf and kill it, let us eat and make merry..." (Luke 15:22–24). The son has been restored and once again belongs to the family.

This prodigious response of the father to his son is the heart of the story and the reason why it is best-loved and also why it is proclaimed in the middle of Lent on Laetare (rejoice) Sunday. We all sin, but we have a God who welcomes us back with open arms. The father's lavish expression is no excuse to sin (presumption), but fills us with hope when we do fall.

It must be understood that God lavishes his love upon us whether we "feel" it or not. Sometimes when you confess your sins you may sense a wash of grace, but most times you do not. Forgiveness and reconciliation is at the heart of God, a God of mercies.

One of the central motifs in Luke's Gospel is joy. In all three parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son – there is abounding joy and merriment when they are found. Joy and celebration are the themes of Laetare Sunday. If you are struggling with a sin, bad habits, or addiction, there is a solution. Admit it and make a move. Now is the time. Your father is patiently waiting for you and will welcome you with open arms. God will lavish you with a great show of affection. His mercy will help you to change. God will sing over you and rejoice over you forever.

Lenten Lessons:

- Who do you relate to? The father, wayward son, or older son?
- Change is possible
- God is patient, affectionate, and prodigious
- Lent is a time to make a move

Lenten Action:

- Pray for healing regarding your image of God

