

Readings for March 31, 2019 -- Fourth Sunday in Lent

The Prodigal Father

Some reflection writers have renamed this parable, "The Prodigal Father" because of the father's extravagant love and abundant mercy, a concept that would have been radical, or "prodigal" for those who heard it in Jesus' time. Author John Shea writes, "we are attached to our past sins, and so cannot quite believe we are sons and daughters of love. This keeps us from joy. We also are alienated from the simple presence of abundance, and so we work for reward, and find ourselves resentful and envious. This keeps us from joy. Only when we break the stranglehold of these two blocking mindsets will we hear the music in the house and know that we are home."

Opening Prayer: (See back pages)

Reading 1 JOS 5:9A, 10-12

The LORD said to Joshua,

"Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you."

While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth of the month.

On the day after the Passover, they ate of the produce of the land in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain. On that same day after the Passover, on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased.

No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

Responsorial Psalm PS 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7.

R. (9a) Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall be ever in my mouth.

Let my soul glory in the LORD; the lowly will hear me and be glad.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Glorify the LORD with me, let us together extol his name.

I sought the LORD, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Look to him that you may be radiant with joy,
and your faces may not blush with shame.

When the poor one called out, the LORD heard,
and from all his distress he saved him.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Reading 2 2 COR 5:17-21

Brothers and sisters: Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Gospel LK 15:1-3, 11-32

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, “this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So to them Jesus addressed this parable: “A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, ‘Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.’” So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But his father ordered his servants, ‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ Then the celebration began. Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, ‘Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, ‘Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.’ He said to him, ‘My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice,

because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.”

Related Reflections

From Fr. John Foley, S.J.

It took a while for the son in our parable to realize what he had done to himself and to his family. But he did notice that he was starving. He made a forced, but perhaps humble decision to go back home and ask for mercy. He was hanging his head just like dogs do. “Please, please, please forgive me.”

You and I have guilt too. Often we are terrified for anyone to know our faults. We think God will respond with rage against us if he finds our sins. So we make Lenten “firm purposes of amendment,” or New Year’s promises, or whatever else. We want to be “worthy” before God with our sins hidden.

But pay very close attention to the young man’s father in the parable. He spots his prodigal son far down the road still going over his lines. Does the father fold his arms and put on an angry face? Not at all. He sets out running. See them meet, enveloped by the thirsty road dust. They embrace and the father kisses his son. The boy blunders out his lines, “I have sinned terribly, I am no longer worthy of...” His father drowns him out, calling for the finest robe in the house, a ring for the young man’s finger, sandals for his feet, and a huge banquet of celebration. He is ecstatic that his son came home. Apply that now to you and me. Our own shame says, “Father, I am a no-good. I am totally unworthy.” Of course we assume God is angry.

“I know what you have done, child,” says God. “You needn’t cower. You are precious to me, and not because you never sin. Come, come have back your brothers, sisters, neighbors, and most of all, your Father. Let me hug you.”

Because he holds us so close to his heart, God is most willing to absorb the losses we inflict. Even if we were to join forces with evil in the world, God would wait and pray and welcome us back, sins and all, with open arms. Notice that Jesus’ arms are wide open on the cross.
(www.liturgy.slu.edu)

From Henri Nouwen’s Personal Journal:

There are two realities to which you must cling. First, God has promised that you will receive the love you have been searching for. And second, God is faithful to that promise. So stop wandering around. Instead, come home and trust that God will bring you what you need. Your whole life you have been running about, seeking the love you desire. Now it is time to end that search.

Trust that God will give you that all-fulfilling love and will give it in a human way. Before you die, God will offer you the deepest satisfaction you can desire. Just stop running and start trusting and receiving.

Home is where you are truly safe. It is where you can receive what you desire... When you come home and stay home, you will find the love that will bring rest to your heart.

(Henri Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom*, Doubleday, 1996)

From Henri Nouwen’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

Leaving home is much more than an historical event bound to time and place. It is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being, that God holds me safe in an eternal embrace, that I am indeed carved in the palms of God's hand and hidden in their shadows. Leaving home means ignoring the truth that God has "fashioned me in secret, moulded me in the depths of the earth and knitted me together in my mother's womb." Leaving home is living as though I do not yet have a home and must look far and wide to find one." Home is the center of my being where I can hear the voice that says: "you are my Beloved, on you my favor rests" – the same voice that gave life to the first Adam and spoke to Jesus, the second Adam; the same voice that speaks to all the children of God and sets them free to live in the midst of a dark world while remaining in the light... I have heard that voice. It has spoken to me in the past and continues to speak to me now. .. When I hear that voice, I know that I am home with God and have nothing to fear. As the Beloved of my heavenly father, "I can walk in the valley of darkness: no evil would I fear."

(Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Doubleday, 1992)

Discussion Questions

- In what ways has this Lenten season helped me to become a "new creation" for the praise of God?
- Thinking about the Prodigal Son Scripture, did you think the father was "foolish" for going to such extremes to welcome back his son? Does this parable change, or clarify your thinking about who God is?
- Can you relate to the brother who stayed home? Has there been a time in your life when you felt things weren't fair? When you felt self-righteous, or angry at doing all the right things and not getting the proper recognition?
- How does the prodigal son's radical rejection of his father reflect the Scripture story of Adam and Eve? What are some of the differences and similarities?
- Have you experienced a time in your life when you said "no" to what God was offering you? When you "moved away" from God's abundant love? Who or what helped you want to return home?
- What is there in my life that keeps me from running toward fullness in Jesus Christ? What will I do about it?

Closing Prayer: (from *Loved as I Am*, Miriam James Heidland, S.O.L.T., Ave Maria Press)

God, please come and find me in the places where I hide from you. Please give me the gift of hope when I feel disappointed, discouraged, and despairing. Give me the courage to be still so I can be found by

you. May I be open to your embrace, the embrace that brings communion, healing, and restoration.
Amen.

Suggested Music

Simplicity (Rend Collective)

Land of the Rising Sun (Ike Ndolo)

Good Good Father (Chris Tomlin)

Healing Begins (Tenth Avenue North)

Zum Einige, from Deutsche Messe (Schubert)

Wohin soll ich mich wenden,
wenn Gram und Schmerz mich drücken?
Wem künd' ich mein Entzücken,
wenn freudig pocht mein Herz?
Zu dir, zu dir, o Vater,
komm ich in Freud' und Leiden,
du sendest ja die Freuden,
du heilest jeden Schmerz.

Ach, wenn ich dich nicht hätte,
was wär' mir Erd' und Himmel?
Ein Bannort jede Stätte
ich selbst in Zufalls Hand.
Du bist's, der meinen Wegen
ein sich'res Ziel verleihet,
und Erd' und Himmel weinet
zu süßem Heimatland.

Doch darf ich dir mich nahen,
Mit mancher Schuld beladen?
Wer auf der Erde Pfaden
Ist deinem Auge rein?
Mit kindlichem Vertrauen
Eil' ich in Vaters Arme,
Fleh' reuerfüllt: Erbarme,
Erbarm', o Herr, dich mein!

Süß ist dein Wort erschollen:
Zu mir, ihr Kummervollen!
Zu mir! Ich will euch laben,
Euch nehmen Angst und Not.
Heil mir! Ich bin erquicket!
Heil mir! Ich darf entzückt
Mit Dank und Preis und Jubel

Where should I go,
When grief and pain push me?
to whom do I call my delight,
If happy my heart pounds joyfully?
To you, to you, Oh Father,
I come in joy and sorrow,
Yes, you send the joy,
You heal every pain.

Oh, if I did not have you,
What would Earth and sky be to me?
Every place a banned place
Myself in chance's hands.
You are my Way
I give myself to you
and Earth and sky weep
To sweet homeland.

But may I come near to you,
Loaded with some guilt?
Who on Earth's path
Is clean in your eye?
With childlike trust
I hurry to the Father's arms
I beg with repentance: pity,
Have pity, oh Lord, on me!

Sweetly sounds your Word:
Come to me, all of you sorrow-filled!
Come to me, I want to refresh you all.
Do not fear or distress.
Seek refuge in me! I am refreshment!
Seek refuge in me! I am delight!
With thankfulness, praise, and cheer

Mich freu'n in meinem Gott.

I am happy in my God