

Fourth Sunday of Lent - C

Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

Dear Friends,

Luke's magnificent parable continues this Lent's theme of repentance. The name of the parable, the Prodigal Son, fails to grasp much of the drama and message of the parable. It is definitely about three persons. Each character has much to teach us.

The first son's story tells of human greed and indulgence encountering the harsh limits of the human condition. The way out is repentance and the encounter with mercy.

The second person is the father. Here we have the great insights into human relationships holding sway over the power of possessions and prestige. He shows us clearly the importance of people over property. The father's response deals with the abandonment of both sons. It is hardly possible to have a more simple and profound mirror of the unconditional love and mercy of God.

In the second son we have the image of interior alienation that has festered like a cancer over the years. The African American community has a rich description of the experience, the pity party. His self-absorption blinded him to the beautiful love right in front of him. Instead, a hidden anger and jealousy blocked out all the blessings of an incredible parent.

The first son found himself lost in the dark pit of total failure and utter despair. The painful conclusion was the degradation of feeding the pigs. He approached his father in fear and trembling with his well prepared plea for minimal acceptance. His last-hope spiel was cut off by the outrageous rush of mercy and forgiveness by the father.

The whole scene is a litany of violations of expected behavior by the father. It was totally uncouth to leave the house and even worse to run. The embrace was completely out of character for an older man in this culture. The fattened calf in these circumstances was simply unheard of. Every accepted ritual for an offended father was shattered in a total loss of dignity. All the broken cultural norms gave further force to the father's overwhelming cry: I love you! I forgive you! I accept you in great joy! You are back and nothing else matters. On with the party!

The same routine, in a more subtle way, was carried out in the case of the second son. The father left the house once again in violation of the demands of his dignity. He gave no credence to the despicable description of him as a horrible and unconcerned father. The hostility and anger was met with hand reaching out in mercy and understanding. The self-pity was countered with an invitation to give all that he had. The withdrawal was challenged with the invitation to join the celebration.

He did not let the son's pathetic anger and jealousy obstruct the dialogue. His only response to a sea of negativity was love, patience, encouragement and acceptance. In the father's actions, Jesus unveils the awesome wonder of the Father's mercy and unconditional love. Our Lenten call is to recognize ourselves in both sons. We are invited to the party. We are called to let go of our blinding indulgence in the dead-end pursuits of life. We are asked to forgo our self-pity and jealousy. Most of all, the utter life-robbing power of the long held grudge is laid out in revealing simplicity.

The indispensable response on our part is clear. We need to accept ourselves in our broken condition. We are called to share God's unconditional love with our brothers and sisters. We are asked to give up the feeling of resentment. We are invited to open up the dialogue in spite of all the perceived violations of our rights and dignity. We need to accept God's ever-present love and mercy on our Lenten journey to the great party of Easter Sunday.