



## FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 14th, 2010

GATHERING TIME (10-15 minutes)

### **Introduction to the Word:**

It happened a number of years ago, but her words were so sharp and her emotions so charged that I doubt I will ever forget them: "*I just hate that story!*" this young woman blurted out, immediately following the proclamation of the gospel narrative. On special invitation from a group using "Celebrating the Word," I was participating in their weekly faith-sharing experience. The gospel narrative for that week was the parable of the prodigal son—one that most readers will remember. It is a parable that arguably has stirred the most intense and varied emotional response of any of Jesus' parables.

Today's feature scripture passage is from Luke and is recognized as "The Story of the Prodigal Son." However it could just as easily be labeled: "*The Joyful Homecoming of the Wayward Son,*" or, "*The Jealousy of the "Loyal Son,"* or "*The Loony Love of a Misguided Father.*" Some Biblical writers consider this the greatest short-short story ever told. Renowned artists have featured it in music, in art, and in dance. But this story will not be found in company with the giants of literature because it is much more than a great story or a superb piece of fiction. Walter Burghardt S.J. (1991) goes so far as to state categorically ... "**Here is the gospel of Jesus Christ in a nutshell!** It captures the heart of the Christian message. It unmistakably details what God's Son took human flesh *to do*"

Today we want to unravel the fabric of this parable in order to uncover its inherent riches and come to *experience* first hand the very heart of Jesus' Good News. Luke, the consummate story teller, first wants the reader to be aware of *the context* for Jesus' story of "the man who had two sons." Luke writes: "*The tax collectors and sinners...were all crowding around to listen to him, (Jesus) and the Pharisees and scribes complained saying: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* They are putting in question Jesus' legitimacy as a teacher by criticizing the frequent occasions he spent with "public sinners." Jesus, in response, tells three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and today's parable, the prodigal son. It is a great story with an ever greater message.

### **Warm-up Activity:**

A phenomenon in church practice in recent times is the disposition of most Catholics towards the sacrament of reconciliation. Surprisingly the majority of participants in Sunday mass receive Eucharist. How would you explain this radical change in our sense of serious sin? Are we "more holy" than in years past? Do we not need the sacrament of penance anymore? Do we no longer believe in a place called "hell?" Share your thoughts on such questions as these.

## The Table of the Word

### **Reconciliation: a time for rejoicing**

This mid Lent Sunday which we know traditionally as Laetare Sunday, might also be known as reconciliation Sunday for that is the drift of the readings assigned for today's Eucharistic celebration. The path to joy is a radical journey, Hellwig reminds us (1987). To walk that road, we must first be reconciled to God, who is the source of joy. This is the underlying message of today's parable of the prodigal son.

Our reflection, prayer and discussion today are meant to confirm for us that once we slough off *the old person* we have to dedicate ourselves to the formation of the new one. This journey takes a lifetime to achieve, and requires personal commitment all along the way.

This may sound like hard work, and it is, until you consider the alternate route, one of self centeredness and disregard of the plight of mostly everyone else. Withhold yourself from God, and you will soon discover what isolation really feels like.

This may sound like hard work, and it is, until you consider the alternate route, one of selfishness. Withhold yourself from God, and you will soon discover what isolation really feels like (ibid).

**Leader:** *Today we celebrate God's incredible love and capacity to forgive.*

**Lord Jesus,** you readily forgive our wayward ways,  
**Christ Jesus,** you desire only that we *return home* to you,  
**Lord, Jesus,** you challenge us to model your compassion,

**Lord, have mercy.**  
**Christ, have mercy.**  
**Lord, have mercy.**

### **Let us pray**

O Lord,

Keep us always mindful of your mercy and compassion.

Strengthen our faith in the mystery of the cross; and grant us hearts attuned to your Word, so that we may follow, as faithful disciples, Jesus, your Son, and our brother. .

Amen.

### **SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME** (45 minutes)

(As Christians we believe that the **WORD** of God we hear proclaimed each Sunday is an empowering Word, and that God is present in the Word proclaimed. This is the Word that God wants us to hear today. The dynamic of the Small Christian Community, namely, reflecting on our life story within the context of this Word, and sharing the insights of these reflections, is such that God's Spirit becomes present, and the gifts of the Spirit are experienced as empowering and life giving. Because it is a privileged time it is incumbent on us in the small group to proclaim God's Word with due reverence, to be attentive to this proclamation, and respectful of the communal interaction. The facilitator has arranged for group members to proclaim the three readings.)

#### **FIRST READING** (Joshua 5:9, 10–12)

The Lord said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt."

While the Israelites were camped in Gilgal they kept the Passover in the evening on the fourteenth day of the month in the plains of Jericho.

On the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land, and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

## **SECOND READING** (2 Corinthians 5:17–21)

Brothers and sisters: If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Christ we might become the righteousness of God.

The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

## **GOSPEL** (Luke 15:1-3, 11–32)

A reading from the holy gospel according to Luke. **Glory to you, Lord.**

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them a parable: “There was a man, who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So the father divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.

“When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. The young man would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

“But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’”

“So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

“Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. Her called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. The slave replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’

“Then the elder son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen!

For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fatted calf for him!’

“Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’” The gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.**

*(Allow 5-10 minutes for quiet and but brief reflection on a meaningful word or thought)*

### **COMMENTARY:**

The gospel story is introduced by a statement showing that some local authorities, i.e. the scribes and Pharisees, were disturbed with Jesus because of his hospitality towards sinners. This is the issue Luke wants to address in today’s gospel. We have grown used to naming the story “The Prodigal Son” with the word *prodigal* meaning “squandering” as in one’s fortune, or one’s talent, or even one’s life. A responsible father surely would have taken steps to safeguard his property and wealth rather than risk losing it because of an unreasonably request. Why did the father give in to the younger son when what he (the son) obviously needed was a lesson in growing up? Moreover, when the son returned in disgrace, why host a major celebration? And what about fairness towards the elder son—the loyal and responsible one? If anyone deserved a party it was him. As for the father, did he honestly have all his wits about him in this entire fiasco?

So many questions Luke leaves us asking ourselves in this parable. The picture of the father is straightforward. Initially he put no obstacles in his son's path when he comes and demands his share of the estate. After many years of wanton living the wayward son returns home, destitute. The father disregards convention and rushes to welcome him home. And what a welcome! He treats him as one brought back to life, lavishly clothing him and hosting a sumptuous feast in his honor. He is no less attentive to the other son, going out to plead with him to join the celebration, assuring him the major portion of the estate. This picture, notes Bergant, "shatters the traditional patriarchal image and offers us a radically different picture of fatherhood, a picture totally incomprehensible to both of his sons." (2003). The father here is neither domineering nor disinterested even when he disagrees with his sons. When it becomes clear they have been mistaken, he forgives them. This startling new picture becomes a metaphor for our understanding God as we will see later.

Luke’s story is intended to demonstrate two things: First, that our God is not a God of vengeance, waiting to pounce on us as soon as we stray. Rather, our God is like a most loving and forgiving parent—a God of compassion, always inviting us to reconciliation.

*“Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?” Even these may forget but I will not forget you” (Isaiah 49:14-16).*

The primary wisdom revealed in Luke’s parable is that **God loves the sinner** “...even while still in his sins.” This reality did not cease to amaze Paul (2nd reading) who had experienced first hand the sublime nature of God’s forgiveness and love. In our story today, the vagrant son returning home did not even get a chance to ask for mercy and forgiveness. Instead, he was swept up by his father’s embrace and promised an unforgettable future.

Luke’s second point: Not only does God forgive, but God *takes the initiative*, the first step in seeking our forgiveness and “*There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents*” (Lk 15:10). Luke carefully designed this tightly knit plot to be a metaphor for our understanding of how God operates. Contrasting the loyalty of the elder son with the infidelity of the younger son, the author is contrasting the compassion of God with the mean-spiritedness of the scribes and

Pharisees who distained the tax collectors and public sinners. In our picture of the runaway son and the compassionate father, these same tax collectors and sinners are welcomed and reconciled by Jesus. On the other hand the scribes and Pharisees are like the elder son, who had completely misread the relationship with his father as one of slavery.

In summary, the reconciliation that comes from God comes with a commission. Having ourselves been reconciled, we are given *the ministry of reconciliation*. We now become the instruments to whom the world is reconciled to God in Christ. We become ambassadors of salvation. The Gospel story of the brothers is unfinished. Were they ever reunited? Perhaps their reconciliation is up to us to complete.

(Allow 5-10 minutes to identify and then reflect on a word or phrase that has special meaning for you.)

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. (Gospel) "...he (*the father*) ran and put his arms around him and kissed him (*his son*)."
  - a) Why does the parable of the prodigal son genuinely disturb some people as it does?
  - b) It would seem that God loves the *returned* sinner even more than he loves the one who stayed home and tried to stay out of trouble. Would you agree or disagree? Comment.
  - c) What would the "tough love" experts have to say about the father's "strange" behavior toward his wayward son?
  - d) Someone once asked me, "Where would parents be if they raised their children in the same manner as the father tried to raise his in this story?" Share your thoughts and responses.
2. What have you gained as a person of faith? What have you had to *give up*? As you reflect on your commitment to your religious faith, how would you describe your personal motives for "staying faithful?" Which of the following might apply to you?
  - a) Your strong sense of duty and responsibility?
  - b) Your ongoing search for happiness and peace?
  - c) Your sense of being in a love relationship with an incredible God?
  - d) Other

### CARING-PRAYING TIME: (15-20 minutes)

#### 1. Word for the Week:

"Everything I have is yours." (Gospel)

#### 2. Suggestion for the week:

Make time for the sacrament of reconciliation. Forgive those who need your forgiveness

Seek forgiveness from those you have wronged. The heart and soul of Christianity is right here.

#### 3. Intercessions: (Response: **Lord, hear our prayer**)

**Leader:** To the God whose care embraces each son and daughter in need, let us pray in Jesus' name.

**That** the church, the household of God, may reflect the Father's compassion and hurry to welcome sinners with an embrace of love and a place at the table, we pray...

**That** leaders of nations may heed the message of reconciliation and forsake violent conflict, we pray...

**That** young people who have run away and those alienated from their families may find the understanding they seek and the care they need for their healing, we pray...

**That** those burdened by hurtful memories or the guilt of past sins may come to know God whose forgiveness is unconditional and freely given, we pray...

**That** we whose many sins have been so freely and frequently forgiven may rejoice with all our brothers and sisters who return to God, we pray...

**That** the people of Haiti continue to receive the support of the world wide community as they rebuild their lives, their homes and their country, we pray...

**That the people** who make their home in the holy land: Jews, Muslims and Christians, that mindful of a common God and a common ancestor in faith, Abraham, they not give up on their quest for justice and peace, but find ways to live life together with mutual acceptance, forgiveness and love, we pray...

**How can we help you in prayer this week?**

**Let us pray**  
(together)

*O good and gracious God,  
Father rich in mercy and pardon,  
welcome into the embrace of your love all your sons and daughters  
as they come home to you, hearts burdened with guilt, spirits filled with repentance.  
Clothe them again in the shining garments of salvation, and give them a foretaste of the joy you  
have prepared for us in the paschal banquet of the Lamb. We ask this through  
our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever. Amen.*

**With hands and hearts united in gratitude for God's favors on us today, we pray that all those in our influence be moved to be open to your Word and your Spirit, while we pray as one,**

**OUR FATHER**

**"Prevent truth decay;  
Brush up on the Bible"**

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