

3/10/13 FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT, YEAR C The Prodigal Son

Stories of fathers and sons, brother competing with brothers, are manifold in the world of novels, drama, biographies, and psychology. In our refectory reading during meals we are hearing the lives of the men in President Lincoln's cabinet, William Sewall, Salmon Chase, Edward Bates, from their childhood up. They are the men who had vied with him for the Republican nomination for the presidency. The childhood of Chase is the saddest I think because of his stern, demanding father and later an uncle as surrogate, who both made him spend long hours at his studies to satisfy their expectations, and punished him severely when he failed them.

The Bible too is full of stories about fathers and sons, mothers too. In it we read about Isaac and Ishmael the sons of Abraham, about Esau and Jacob the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca and the parental favoritism that led to Jacob's deceits. Jacob had twelve sons from his two wives and two slave women. We know the results that favoritism and sibling rivalry generated among them. Jesus used our common human experiences to tell stories that reveal some truth about our relationship with God or with one another. Today from St. Luke's gospel we heard the parable of the Prodigal Son, which follows two other parables about lost things; namely, a straying sheep and a missing coin. In all three instances there is joy and celebration when the lost things are found.

Jesus told this parable to the Pharisees and scribes, who were complaining about his eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus, the Son of God, told these proud sons of Abraham a story to help them get beyond their understanding of God as a Law Giver, punishing those who disobey and rewarding only those who obey it fully. He wanted them to see another side of God, a God who is compassionate, abounding in love and mercy. Maybe they would realize they have the mind of the elder son, who complained, "I have served you all these years and never disobeyed your orders;" and obviously he felt he got no joy out of it. With such a mindset the elder son cannot understand the father's ordering a celebration for the home coming of his wasteful brother.

Obviously God is God and we are his creation. Our relationship is not between equals. It is written somewhere that God dwells in light inaccessible. Without a special grace we cannot see God face to face to know him the way Jesus knows him. It is written somewhere else that it is a frightful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, and again that our God is a consuming fire. If these were the only images we had of God, we would be like those who asked that the mountains fall on them rather than be brought into his presence. Or as the prophet warns those who ask God to intervene: Who will endure the day of his coming? For he is like the refiner's fire or like the fuller's lye.

In his own actions and dealings with human sinfulness Jesus reveals the mind of the Father who sent him. He came to call sinners to repentance, inviting them to accept the gift of mercy and forgiveness. During his earthly ministry, as a man like us in all things but sin, he felt he had to start by conversing, questioning, even sitting with sinners, accepting them where they were in order to show them better ways. The real focus of the parable is the father who is prodigal with his forgiveness and his mercy. 'While the son was still a long way off the father caught sight of him returning home. He got up, ran to him, threw his arms around him and kissed him, and then ordered his servants to prepare a feast.' What wayward son or daughter would not long to fall into the arms of a God like that? Jesus said that there is tremendous joy in heaven over even one repentant sinner .

What about us? Which of the characters in the story can you or I identify with? Jesus' revelation of the ways of God that are not our ways challenges us to look at our own understanding of what God expects of us, hopes for us. Also we must look at how we relate to one another as members of God's family, as brothers and sisters among the children of God. Is God really like a father who shows no favorites? Who does not judge by appearances? Who alone reads the heart and our innermost thoughts?

The Old Testament tells us that God does not desire the death of sinners; rather God urges us repent and be turned around so that we can be embraced in his arms. Some of the fathers and mothers of the Church interpreted the embracing arms of God to be the Son and the Spirit he sent on missions to save all made in his image, to begin the evolving of a new creation. All initiative for our salvation comes from God. It is not our own doing. We simply have to be humble enough to know we need God's forgiveness, and trusting enough to accept and even claim it.

When, like the young son, we come to our senses, and realize the dire situation we put ourselves into by our spirit of disobedience, it is time to acknowledge our foolishness – for all sin is stupidity or blindness. It is time to turn around and go to confession. In the sacrament we experience the mercy of God, reconciling us to himself through his own Son's loving sacrifice, restoring us to unity with all our brothers and sisters in Christ through the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. Along with Paul's urging the Corinthians, I implore you to be reconciled with God.

As we go on to participate in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross in the Eucharistic rites, we have here a pledge that we may one day arrive at the eternal Promised Land, heaven, where the sacramental body of Christ, our manna, will cease and we will feed mystically on the very Word of God himself. To him with Father and Holy Spirit be honor, glory, praise and loving obedience now and forever. AMEN