

HOMILY FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

MARCH 9 – 10, 2013

This parable is a very familiar one. Perhaps it is so familiar that it has lost some its urgency for us. Luke tells us this parable of Jesus after Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem and is journeying toward what he knows will be the cruel culmination of his life. He has tried to live in fidelity to God and to the traditions of his upbringing, but that faithfulness has led to his being hated by the chief priests and many of the Pharisees.

As we age, as I have, and know that we are in the latter part of our journey, our choices take on a new urgency, and we notice everyday things, like a child's exuberance with more appreciation. It was the same for Jesus; on his journey to Jerusalem, he taught his disciples and preached to the crowds with a new sense of urgency, calling into question the crowd's usual ways of thinking, speaking of God in new accents.

This parable is an attempt by Jesus to tell us what was essential to his message of salvation. We know the story of the younger son, the son who asked for and received his inheritance and spent it unwisely, perhaps even sinfully. He ended up feeding pigs. Could a Jew come to any lower state? Yet I have some sympathy for this son. He was restless and wanted more. So he struck out to see new things and visit new places, free from the restraints of an obedient son.

After he had sunk so low as to tend pigs, he decided to ask his father to take him in again; not as a beloved son, but as a servant. He had his speech prepared. He returned to his own country. His father paid no attention to the son's prepared confession because he was too busy embracing him, kissing him, ordering a feast and celebration. Thank goodness the son didn't insist on being taken in as a servant, claiming unworthiness. He opened himself to the prodigal love of his father and apparently entered joyfully into the dancing and celebration.

We know the story of the older son, too, who was extremely disgruntled that his wayward brother had been received with such joy and celebration. After all, he had remained with his father and fulfilled all the duties of a son. His father had never even offered him a young goat with which to celebrate. At least for now, he closed himself off both to his father and to his brother, even though his father reassured him of his love.

Parables throw us into a quandary. They raise more questions than they answer. Certainly this parable is not recommending that we go off and do our own thing and the devil may care! Certainly it is not recommending that we neglect our duty toward those to whom we owe respect. At least today, I think it is telling us this. Our sinfulness or our obedience is not nearly as important as the demand that we open ourselves to the overtures of love. Why should that be so difficult? Because accepting the love of another, including the love of God, makes us vulnerable to the other. We like to be in control of our own destiny. Both brothers wanted to be in control, only in different ways. What the younger brother was able to manage, though, was not identifying himself with his sinfulness, but rather rejoicing in a new understanding of the love his father held for him. The older brother was not yet able to give up his identity as a dutiful son. That meant more to him than either his father or his brother.

I think it is important that we look further into the elder son's sense of duty. At some point, even those of us who live dutiful lives need to let go of duty and fall into love. It's not that we become undutiful or irresponsible, but that the reasons we perform our duties change to the extent that we can no longer call them duties. That is especially true of those duties we may name religious.

God's love is not something we earn by doing the right thing. From the first moments of our lives, we are surrounded by God, we drink in the Divine. As we grow, we experience God in the

sun and the clouds, our joys and our sorrows, God's felt presence and God's felt absence. We become vulnerable to the pressures of love, not only from those closest to us, but also to those whom we dislike the most. We may be thrown into confusion by this, but confusion gives birth to wisdom.

We know that the father in this story is also prodigal, prodigal in his love. We know that the father is a symbol of God. Father, Abba, is a name Jesus used for God. We could say that this name for God brings forward in history an evolving understanding of God. Just as Jesus introduced to us to an image of God that was consonant with his experience and his culture, so must we see what image of God lives in our own experiences. We cannot settle down to the one image of Father. There is no one image of God, or even all possible images of God that satisfactorily depicts the creative power of the universe whom we name God.

The Hindus speak of 333 million gods. I think this means that the faces of God are infinite. To settle on one, is to reduce God to something we think we can understand, to make an idol of one image. Soon, our image of God is restricted to maleness. Then, we end up with the idea that somehow males are inherently better symbols of God. Instead of the symbol of father pointed beyond itself to a limitless God, it reduces God to a father. As this parable shows us, Father is a powerful symbol of God, but it should not be our only one.

It is important to acknowledge that whatever image of God is meaningful to us, now, as our experiences change, that image will become inadequate. Karl Rahner suggested an understanding of God that is very appealing to me. He spoke of God as the ever-receding horizon. The closer we get, the more it recedes, drawing us further and further into Mystery, Mystery with no end. Personally, I think that is what heaven is all about – being drawn further and further into the Mystery of God – without end

Poets help us image God in new ways. T.S. Eliot talks about God by writing we have hints, hints followed by guesses, and all the rest is Incarnation. R.S. Thomas writes, “He is that Great Void, we must enter.... Francis Thompson writes of *The Hound of Heaven*.

But, you may ask, what difference does it make how we image God? It makes a lot of difference to ourselves, but also to the credibility of Catholicism throughout the global community, generally, to those young teenagers and young adults seeking to make sense of God in today’s world. It makes a difference to us if we feel that restlessness of the younger son, the restlessness St. Augustine describes as leading us to God, allowing ourselves to be drawn further and further into that Divine embrace. It makes a difference to people throughout the world who are interested in religion, and who wonder if such an ancient tradition has anything to say about God to the contemporary world. It makes a difference to people who wonder how our teachings about God can be reconciled with scientific mindsets and scientific discoveries. If our faith is to be more than a looking back to what we have already been taught, we must see God in new ways to lead us into an unknown future, a future into which God is calling us.

Today’s first reading speaks to this quite well. While the Jews were wandering in the desert, God provided manna for them. As soon as their situation changed, however, as soon as they were able to provide produce for themselves in the land of Canaan, the manna ceased. I can imagine myself wanting to settle down and continue to be taken care of by receiving the manna for the rest of my life. But for some reason, there is no stopping on the path into God. We have rest periods, certainly, but there is just no sitting down and saying, I’ve arrived. I’m satisfied. Even the party celebrating the return of the younger son ended, and he had to get up the next morning and begin his new life.

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