

Fourth Sunday of Lent – March 6, 2016

It's a great story. One of Jesus' best. It works on so many levels, there's always something more to savor. Lots of ink has been spilled over the details of today's gospel story of the Prodigal Son but there's one powerful hint we should not lose sight of. And it's this.

The father, the prodigal father if you will, is different from the others. He does not play by the established rules. His actions in the parable are clearly unconventional, even a bit dangerous. He breaks with deeply ingrained cultural rules here. This father is no sort of tribal chief who is bound by patriarchal forms of father-son obligations. Instead, we have here a metaphor for God who respects our freedom, mourns our faults, waits patiently for our return, and accepts our love as pure gift. If we miss this detail, we may miss the parable's power to surprise us into conversion and change of heart. The parable should be prompting us to ask ourselves if we really know God, and if we are comfortable with the God who loves so lavishly, forgives so freely, and wishes so fervently to be reconciled with every sinner. Just who is the God we believe in?

So please notice how the loving father earns his title as a "prodigal." He does not take a swing at his sons, as some of us may be tempted to do. Humanly speaking, he has lost both his sons: the younger one to a life of reckless dissipation; the older one to a life of resentful self-righteousness. This father doesn't love either of his sons according to what they deserve. He just loves them because of who he is rather than because of who they are. He never seems to tire of giving his love away. Mercy for one is mercy for all.

The parable doesn't tell us how it all turned out. Jesus leaves it that way because the story is never finished and even today we are included. Are we going to bolt away, again and again, from the Father's love? Are we going to stand alone outside the door insisting on being right and proper?

Whether we are saints or scoundrels, whether we are hot or cold or lukewarm, there's only one relationship that really matters. We are brothers and sisters of one loving Father. This Father refuses to give us the love we deserve, but cannot be stopped from giving us the love we need. Gratefully, then, we are bid to share that mercy, that compassion, with as many pilgrims as we can find. So many lost. Who will find them, if not you and me? "So look to the Lord that you may be radiant with joy...and your faces may not blush with shame."

P.S. – Remember Rembrandt's "Prodigal Son" painting. Notice that Rembrandt painted two different hands on the father. The left hand is larger, more masculine. The right hand is smaller, more feminine. Reminder: God loves us strongly, like a father, and tenderly, like a mother.