

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

God Forbid! Oh, wait a minute.

That means he would eat with me!

Laetare Sunday! Rejoice!



If you look at the two hands of the Father in DaVinci's Prodigal Son, his left hand seems decidedly masculine and pulls the son's right shoulder toward the Father's embrace. The other hand, more delicate and feminine, seems to be caressing the repentant son's back. In this artistic narration of the parable, God is depicted with traits usually associated both with a loving father and mother, fitting enough as God is a loving creator and parent.

REJOICE!

God's Love is unconditional

Is Mine?

Nearly every single one of us can identify with the prodigal son. We know that we struggle to follow God's will and that we'd generally prefer to do our own thing. We have witnessed things come crashing down before our eyes. It crushes us. If we're lucky, we remember, like the prodigal son, that we have a God who loves us and will always welcome us back home. Many of us, also, can identify with the other son. Sometimes we see people who fell much further than we did or in ways we find particularly offensive and think, "Thank God that's not me." Sometimes, we might even think, "Don't they know what that person did?! What are they doing letting "them" into a church?!" But, just like the father in the parable loves both of his sons, so too does our God love us. The response of the father to the elder son, "your brother was dead and has come to life again," is deeply profound, because in just these words, Christ reveals the entire point of him coming into this world.

Familiarity with the parable of the prodigal son may breed superficiality. Hearing the parable year after year might cause us to breeze past the hardship, knowing that a beautiful scene of contrition, mercy and fundamental goodness awaits. No judgement here. After all, we need stories of grace that reassure and speak to our hearts, especially in difficult times. The story of the prodigal son certainly is that. But what if we didn't race to

the end? What if we didn't know the conclusion by heart? What if we, like the father, just saw a son going further and further down a bad path, not knowing what would happen next?

How many of us might know that experience? How many have had a child, close friend or loved one head down a path of self-destruction, rationalizing that this is just a phase they're going through, or in denial about how bad the situation might be?

Perhaps like so many parents or guardians, the father in the parable had exhausted himself with different methods and strategies to help his son, teaching, punishment, charity, rewards, and ultimatums until finally, the son breaks his heart completely, asking for his inheritance and then leaving. You can imagine the horrible mix of emotions this could cause: guilt, sadness, fear, questioning "was there something I could have done differently?" Remembering good times and wondering how they got here. Perhaps worse still is the feeling of helplessness. Knowing there's nothing further that can be done *and* knowing that his son hasn't hit the bottom.

Here's where we likely want to skip to the end, jump to the happy reconciliation. But let's pause here instead. Let's pause here because while this is a place no one wants to be, unfortunately all too many of us find ourselves here. This long waiting, not knowing if things will get better and not being able to do anything about it. Sadly, these are also things we don't talk about. We're not good at revealing our hurts or risking vulnerability. The father in the parable likely doesn't want to share his hurt and his concerns with his neighbors. Yet the extent to which he rejoices at his son's change of heart shows the depth of his own suffering.

And while our readings highlight God's mercy and the new beginnings God creates, let's not forget the father in his time of suffering in silence. In fact, we might consider the parable an invitation to extend mercy to those stuck in that horrible place of watching someone they care for make bad choices. It's hard to show mercy when people don't let us know they're suffering. Some may hide it well while others might appear unkind and irritable without reason. Can we offer grace and mercy without knowing the reason? I know that sounds hard but think of the difference it could make. We all deserve a place at the table!



Laetare! Rejoice!

Come on home!

Fr. Dan Thiess, C.M.