

**Lent IV - Year C – Rose Sunday – March 27, 2022**  
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“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.”

In nomine+

There are sermon topics that come up naturally, every so often, that loom before the preacher as an Everest that demands an attempt be made to conquer it. I can easily name a few of them for you: Christmas Eve! The Transfiguration! Any service in the Sacred Triduum! Pentecost! And God help us all, Trinity Sunday! Then there is the second tier: Almost any of the parables of Jesus, nearly everything in Genesis and Exodus, and the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of I Corinthians. There's a third tier, as well: Those are the homilies required for weddings, funerals and baptisms. The first dozen or so of these, are pretty easy. When one arrives at the twenties and thirties, the challenge grows with each subsequent celebration. The question that always arises is: What on earth can I possibly say that hasn't been said before and probably a lot better than I'll be able to say it?

Today, I offer you, what I would call, a second tier, double. The parable of the Prodigal Son, or as many modern interpreters prefer, the parable of the Loving and/or Forgiving Father. This parable is so well known and so often cited that we can't help ourselves when we find ourselves nodding and secretly saying: Oh, yah, I know where this is going. Time to relax and coast.

If we do, we deprive ourselves of a powerful and reassuring blessing, because the message of acceptance and loving reconciliation that it carries is at the very heart of Laetare Sunday. If we have undertaken Lenten disciplines that have proven difficult or onerous, a story that affirms the attention and concern of a Loving Father who is reaching out to us can provide just the refreshment we need to continue. So, there is that!

This morning, rather than running the risk of boring you with a sermon that you've heard many times before about the willful and ungrateful child who has to return home in disgrace, or the arrogant child who begrudges him the welcome home party he is given, I'd like to share some of my own thoughts and meditations as I attempted to engage this parable, yet, once again.

I became aware that this parable has a literary context which I have overlooked these many years. The fifteenth chapter of Saint Luke's Gospel begins: Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him (Jesus). And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them. So, he told them this parable”: Then, before we get to today's parable, Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Many biblical scholars now believe that the two parables which intervene were inserted by the author/editor of Luke's Gospel, into a more or less cohesive pericope, which interrupts the intended continuity and flow of the introduction to the parable, itself. After some thought, I think I have to agree with them. The lost sheep and the lost coin do not require forgiveness or understanding. There is no reconciliation or restoration of personal or emotional ties as there certainly is in our parable for today, and there is no moral or ethical lesson being taught, either.

Jesus, in the midst of tax collectors, despised collaborators with the Roman occupiers, and sinners, a class of people whose conduct and behavior has gotten them expelled from synagogue and temple, is speaking to a group who pride themselves on their righteousness and scrupulosity in observance of the law. The implied analogy of these two groups to the two sons could not have been missed. We are not told what kind of reaction Jesus got to this most pointed and precisely aimed bit of spiritual instruction. My guess is that they were dumbstruck and departed to think and probably plan for a better outcome on another day.

I have a favorite New Yorker cartoon posted in my home office. It is a drawing of two men facing each other in what is clearly some heavenly location. One is a kindly looking person whom I believe is a welcoming angel (or maybe even God) and the other is a sad and troubled man, who seems to be seeking admission to the heavenly realm. The caption reads: “No that isn’t a sin either. My goodness! You must have worried yourself to death.”

It caused me to consider what are the sins of these two brothers, and much to my surprise, the younger comes off much the better. He did no dishonor to his father by asking for what was legally his. He may have been foolish, irresponsible and stupid when left to his own devices, and he came back making no demands or excuses. That allows some room for prideful self-centeredness and maybe some unsubstantiated lust and gluttony. Young and stupid are not sins, thank God! His older brother, on the other hand can easily be indicted for pride, envy, jealousy, anger and what is perilously close to showing disrespect for his father. The current critique of unacknowledged privilege also invites the question of whether his first-born status and the privileges that have come with it may not in some way have been responsible for his brother’s wanting to get away from home, with his inheritance intact, while the father still lives. Speculation only invites more speculation, I’m afraid. But isn’t it fun!

We always spend a lot of time in this parable focused on the sons while, in actuality, Jesus is very clear that this parable is about the father. It begins: “There was a man who had two sons.” A high school English teacher could not ask for a clearer statement of purpose and intent. It is the father we are meant to see in a clearer and more revelatory light. It is the father that responds with loving compliance to the request of the younger son. It is the father who hopefully watches and waits for that son’s return. It is the father who rushes out to greet him and clothe him and welcome him back. And it is the father who again comes out to fetch the older brother who is refusing to celebrate the return of his lost sibling. It is the father invest the time to reassure him that his privileges are not compromised by extending kindness, welcome and acceptance to the one who was lost.

Jesus wants the Pharisees to know that, the man who had two sons is an unambiguous revelation and testimony to the very nature God, of God’s love and God’s desire to extend forgiveness, reconciliation renewal for and among all his children. The Apostle Paul, with a few years distance and a theologian’s perspective offers a similar and expanded version of the same. It is God, the one true God, coming out to us through Christ who offers this reconciliation and restoration to all who seek it. And there is an inherent promise also, that those who seek it will see and know a new creation, a new reality that will change and sanctify their lives and the lives of all those around them.

This extravagant gift of love and acceptance is not to be hoarded, but to be shared. Jesus at the last supper said: As I have washed your feet, so you should wash one another's feet. As you have been sought, welcomed and reconciled to God, so you should seek, welcome and be reconciled to each other. And that is the take-away of our lessons today.

This Laetare Sunday, Rose Sunday, Refreshment Sunday, Mothering Sunday, whatever name you prefer, we can leave with rejoicing and full assurance of our place in God's kingdom. But, we also must leave with a clear mandate, a command, if you will, to extend what we have received and enjoy to all the people in our lives. If we would like to be a part of that new creation, let us commit ourselves to making it happen. We frequently hear, these days: "Be the change you want to see." That is a command not just for Lent, but for a changed life and a changed world that has been promised to us, even if it is only one person at a time.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven!

Amen!