

## Fourth Sunday in Lent

The parable of the prodigal son is as powerful today as the day Jesus first told it to the Pharisees and scribes. “The well-known story strikes familiar chords in the lives of nearly every person today: the temptation to squander a future on the passions of the present, the sad personal discovery of bad choices, plotting a way out of trouble, the longing that parents feel even for children who fail, jealousy within families, the difficult conflict that can arise between good values, the need for celebration, and the everlasting possibility of repentance.” We hear it today because midway through Lent, the liturgy imagines that we are all like this prodigal son. We have come to our senses. From our self-imposed exile we see our persistent patterns of sin. We don’t like some aspects of the person we are. We want to be the person we imagine. And the path under our feet requires above all the virtue of humility. So during Lent we repent, we do penance, we strengthen our prayer, we contribute to the needy, and we fast from all that focuses attention on our pleasures in order to consider more grandly the pleasures of others. Like the prodigal son, we say to ourselves, “I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.’”

Near the end of the parable we meet the older son. His surprise entrance develops the meaning of the story. He reacts to the situation as the Pharisees and scribes must have: He got angry. If we’re honest, we probably feel the same way whenever we witness someone undeserving getting a break. When somebody apologizes, we are often suspicious. Do they really mean it? If they say, “I’ll never do it again,” do they even have the ability to stop committing the same sin? And if, after apologizing, they get rewards and perks that we never got, where’s the justice in that? We never behaved like that sinner; don’t we deserve even more? We want our share of the estate that should come to us.

In some way, the older son has a point. The word “prodigal” doesn’t mean “repentant.” It means “wasteful”. To the older son, it’s not just the younger son who is prodigal; it’s the father who is prodigal - wasting the fattened calf, the finest robes, the jewelry, and even the virtue of mercy. Why squander forgiveness on someone who committed grave sin? The end of the parable corrects the older son’s opinions, but let’s not overlook his values: he worked hard for a living; he obeyed orders; he supported his father when the other son ran away; he did not hustle his inheritance, impatient that his father has not yet died. The older son has righteous anger. But he could not see what the father saw: the younger son’s inner conversion and the satisfaction that comes from showing mercy. Often we are like the older son. We have judged someone else’s behavior based on good principles: our own good morals, personal dedication, and repugnance for sin. But sometimes our best judgments, rooted in goodness, do not see the whole picture. Sometimes conversion merits mercy. Extravagant mercy. Prodigal mercy.

This parable is as powerful today as the day Jesus told it. But imagine a world where this story has lost its power because people are no longer driven by the desire to obtain what they think they deserve, because jealousy evaporates into gratitude, and because embraces of mercy are commonplace. Imagine that world. We’re not there yet, so until then we can expect to be moved every time we hear the well-known parable of the prodigal son.

**Sunday, March 31, 2019**