

Parable addresses our jealousies

THE GOOD NEWS

GOD'S WORD IN EVERYDAY LIVING

By Father Paul Turner



A SINFUL SON, a forgiving father, and a resentful brother act out one of the most penetrating dramas in the Bible. St. Luke, arguably the best writer in the New Testament, tells the tale with extraordinary skill (15:11-32). The parable retains the popular title, "The Prodigal Son," even though few people can tell you that the meaning of "prodigal" is "wasteful."

Even before the parable begins, Luke introduces his theme by describing a gathering of people who play the same roles as the characters in the upcoming story (15:1-2). Tax collectors and sinners come near Jesus to listen to him, while Pharisees and scribes grumble. The sinful, the forgiving, and the resentful are already acting out the drama which Jesus will relate in the parable.

The sinful son begins his fall by asking for his share of the property. Since he would normally receive that portion at the death of his still-healthy father, his request reveals a wish that his parent would drop dead. As he is prodigal, the son spends the money quickly and extravagantly. Reduced from socialite to servant, he feeds pigs, an animal whose flesh the Jews deemed unclean.

FINALLY, the son decides to return, and rehearses a speech which shows remarkable spiritual sensitivity. "Father," he'll say, "I have sinned against heaven and before you." Many of us sinners assume we sin *before* God and *against* someone else, but the son has it right.

The long-suffering father seems to be a model parent, patient, wise and forgiving to both his sons. Apparently on the watch for the prodigal's return, the father sees him, feels compassion, runs, embraces, and kisses his child. Although the son wants to become a slave, the father sees only a son. Fresh grain-fed beef becomes the centerpiece of the cel-

ebration that the one who was dead is alive and who was lost is found.

These images of death and loss provide the real reason why this Gospel comes to us during Lent. We don't have just another admonition to repent, but a foreshadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

LUKE HAS already told us a story of the loss and finding of Jesus as a child at the temple in Jerusalem (2:46). That story too pre-figures the death and resurrection, or the "loss" and the "finding" of Jesus. For the moment, Jesus alarmingly compares himself with the sinful son. He became human, taking on our sinful nature, to promise resurrection for those who die in sin.

The resentful brother, however, is the character that hits home for most who hear this parable. How often we grumble against the blessings of others without realizing the gifts which are ours. The brother rebukes the father with bitter self-righteousness. He says he stayed at home and never disobeyed a command. Yet his tirade reveals how little he values his father's judgment.

When Luke wrote this Gospel, some Jewish Christians in his community very likely resented the Gentile converts. Some of those who had remained faithful to the covenant now felt bitter that non-Jews also received a share. The brother in the parable who never disobeyed the "command" surely reflects this resentment.

THE PARABLE, then, treats much more than our own need to seek and grant forgiveness. It foreshadows the resurrection, and it calls communities to overcome the resentments which divide them.

"How come young children who are catechumens can be confirmed while Catholic children have to wait till high school?"

"Why can Protestant clergy join the Catholic Church as married priests but Catholic priests must remain single?"

"How come my sister gets to date at a younger age than I could?"

"Why is their budget bigger than ours?"

Jealousy only prevents us from counting the many gifts our prodigal God lavishes on us.

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Daily Scripture Readings

Third Sunday in Lent Sunday, March 19

Exodus 3:1-8c, 13-15
Psalms 103:1-4, 6-8, 11
1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12
Luke 13:1-9

Monday, March 20

2 Samuel 7:4-5a, 12-14a, 16
Psalms 89:2-5, 27, 29
Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22
Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24a

Tuesday, March 21

Daniel 3:25, 34-43
Psalms 25:4-9
Matthew 18:21-35

Wednesday, March 22

Deuteronomy 4:1, 5-9
Psalms 147:12-13, 15-16,
19-20
Matthew 5:17-19

Thursday, March 23

Jeremiah 7:23-28
Psalms 95:1-2, 6-9
Luke 11:14-23

Friday, March 24

Hosea 14:2-10
Psalms 81:6-11, 14, 17
Mark 12:28b-34

Annunciation of the Lord

Saturday, March 25

Isaiah 7:10-14
Psalms 40:7-11
Hebrews 10:4-10
Luke 1:26-38

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 26

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12
Psalms 34:2-7
2 Corinthians 5:17-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

