

Homily: 4th Sunday of Lent: Cycle C: 2016: Jos 5: 9, 10-12; Ps. 34; 2 Corth 5: 17-21; Lk 15: 1-3, 11-32

“The Characters in the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Ongoing Call to Conversion”

1. **You and I are being called every day to become a new creation in Christ.** The season of Lent is a powerful reminder of this reality. And this parable of the Prodigal Son is a particularly beautiful reminder of this truth. This is probably the most popular parable of Jesus. I love it, for it shows no person is beyond hope or beyond forgiveness! And all of us should be able to relate to the characters on some level. The character of the **younger son** represents all of those who have fallen away from the love of God for whatever reason. At some point in our lives all of us have been a prodigal son or daughter of God. For some of us it may have been a short period of time; for others a much longer period; and some are still in this stage. **Why do we turn away for God’s all encompassing love for us?** Sometimes it seems too good to be true. Sometimes we are afraid of God and what He might ask of us in our lives, so we run away. Sometimes the world is just so attractive and we think that making our mark in the world and experiencing its pleasures will lead us to the happiness which we so desperately seek as human beings. There is a pain in our existence in this world because we are incomplete and often times we seek to numb ourselves to this pain by “escaping”, be it through *sinful romantic relationship, with friendships with people that are not good for us on any level, by abuse of alcohol, drugs, addiction to television & videogames, sexual immorality, pornography. materialism, career advancement, fashion, gluttony, etc. etc.* - all the various pleasures of the flesh that the younger brother gave himself over to “hook, line, and sinker.” Like the younger brother, who was reduced to caring for the pigs which is the lowest form of life for a faithful Jew - sometimes it is only after hard experience that we discover that having a living relationship with the Blessed Trinity and living the Catholic faith passionately and with integrity is what ultimately fulfills this “God-shaped hole” in our heart and no amount of worldly pleasure can ever do that! **Repentance is the key that opens the door of God’s Divine Mercy. Mercy doesn’t help one who is unrepentant of their sin or deny they even sinned.** We must be honest.

2. What about the character of **the elder brother**? The elder brother in many ways seems like a good person: he was loyal to the Father and did his duties each day toward God, whom the Father in the story represents. But the problem was he simply was doing it out of a sense of duty and not out of a sense of real love. That is why he gets mad when the younger brother returns to the Father. He resents the fact that his younger brother squandered his inheritance on “wine, women and song” and yet the Father receives him back with open arms. He should be punished! How dare he “live it up” and now be treated the same way as me, the one who has been loyal!? The same can happen to us if we are not careful over the years. We may even have turned away from our Prodigal ways of sin and had a big conversion, but **over time we can lose sight of why we are doing what we are doing, faith wise - our hearts can become hardened.** It is all about charity-love for God and neighbor. We should rejoice when people who have lived sinful lives come back to God and the Church - not thinking “*I missed out on all that ‘fun’ and now they are in the same boat as me who has slaved away for God for years.*” Obviously if we think that, we have not served God all these years out of love, but out of fear of punishment or a sense of spiritually slavery - how tragic! One concrete example that ties in last week’s homily on the mystery of the Mass: all the great Catholic spiritual writers say it’s a reality that people can go to Mass and Holy Communion for years without any discernable spiritual growth. Why? Because as human beings we can fall into the spiritual trap of simply “doing our duty”, in regards to Mass, i.e., for some not wanting to go to Hell as it objectively a mortal sin to miss on purpose, or even more common today just out of habit - but do we really love God in Mass and in daily life? And are fervent in our love for Him? **Another aspect of the elder brother dynamic is we often keep God at arm’s length in a self-created comfort zone because we really don’t want to continually change!** The way of holiness is hard work! It is the way of self-denial and putting on Christ Crucified every day in new ways, and our fallen nature which likes the easy path recoils at that reality! The Lord wants us to obey Him and the Church not out of a sense of duty, but out of **love**. Respond to His love with love! We are not to be legalists, minimalists, self-righteously living out

a joyless Christianity; rather we are called to liberation and spiritual freedom in Christ - to live a life of inner spiritual joy - but there is NO other way to that reality than through **the Cross** - the way of self-denial and laying down our life with Christ in self-giving love. That was the secret of the saints and their inner joy! As Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospel, *he who loses His life for my sake will find it! But whoever clings to His life in this world will lose it.*

3. “While the younger son was still a long way off, his Father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.” **What a beautiful image of God’s all-encompassing merciful love** - that He doesn’t want the sinner to die, but to live forever with Him in love! Both the Prodigal Son and the elder brother needed to be reconciled with the **Father** (God) for different reasons, as we have now seen. You and I need that same reconciliation in our own lives, which is why the Lord Jesus gave the beautiful **Sacrament of Reconciliation** to His Church - do we utilize it enough? You and I are also called to imitate the Father’s love by being merciful by seeking out those who are away from the Lord: “the prodigal sons and daughters” we deal with as well as the “elder brothers and sisters”, who are judgmental and difficult to deal with. We need to witness to our faith in holiness and out of a sense of love, not obligation. The Lord calls us to this, even though we are all “works in progress.” The Lord is like the “Hound of Heaven” as the poet Francis Thompson put it after battling alcoholism for many years. He is always pursuing us, to try to save us! May we imitate God in this zealous love for the spiritual salvation of others. **Never give up on other souls!** Are we willing to pray and suffer for others’ conversion? If we are worried about the salvation of our own souls, and the souls of our children, grandchildren, relatives, neighbors and friends, as we should be (which by the way is a sign we are growing in the spiritual life), are we willing to take a share of their Cross in the Lord to help them come around? That is what the saints did on a regular basis. Remember we are all in this together in the mystical Body of Christ. May the Lord help us to embrace our Cross and help others with their Cross, so we all can all later enter the Father’s House in Heaven.