

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent - C  
Joshua 5:9a, 10-12;  
II Corinthians 5:17-21;  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32  
Little Flower - 4/31/19

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's Gospel, Jesus offers the parable of the prodigal son in response to those who were criticizing him for welcoming sinners and eating with them.

The word *prodigal* means wasteful or extravagant. The younger son was certainly wasteful and, therefore, prodigal. The father was certainly extravagant and, therefore, prodigal in welcoming and forgiving his son. However, the parable of the prodigal son is misnamed because the parable is not primarily about the son but about the father. We know this because this parable is included in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel, which consists of three parables of God's mercy. Therefore, the parable should be titled the parable of the prodigal father.

This parable offers several insights into sin and forgiveness.

In the parable, the younger son asked his father for his inheritance. Once his father gave him his inheritance, he squandered it. After he squandered his inheritance and had nothing to live on, the younger son came to his senses and decided to return home to his father's house and ask to be taken in as a servant. Having made this decision, the son tried to figure out how to talk his father into taking him back. However, we are told that "*while he 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.*"

At times, we are very much like the younger son. When we do wrong, we think we have to talk God into forgiving us because we find it difficult to forgive others or ourselves. However, if we really believe that Jesus died once for all, we also have to believe that God has already forgiven us even before we sin. Like the son in the parable, we only have to return to God and accept the forgiveness God freely gives us.

The older son, of course, was not pleased that his father welcomed his younger brother home. He was even less happy that his father was celebrating his brother's return. The father responded by reaching out to the older brother to try to reconcile him with his younger brother.

This parable reveals the deepest meaning of sin and forgiveness. Sin is alienation. The younger son taking his inheritance and moving to a distant country symbolized his alienation from his family. Forgiveness reconciles. The father watching for and welcoming the younger son and then reaching out to the older son symbolizes reconciliation. According to Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, by dying on the cross, Jesus reconciled us to God and, therefore, to one another. At the same time, this does not excuse us from the obligation to seek reconciliation with those against whom we have sinned, to make amends for the wrongs we have committed.

St. Paul reminds us that God has called all of us to the ministry of reconciliation. In fact, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus challenges us to initiate reconciliation: "*Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift here at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift*" [5:23-24]. Jesus does not say, "If you have done something to your brother..." Rather, he says, "If your brother has anything against you..." In other words, it does not matter who started it or whose fault it is. He wants us to be instruments of reconciliation.

My brothers and sisters, God is the prodigal father when it comes to forgiveness and mercy. However, he wants us to be ambassadors of Christ, ambassadors of his forgiveness and reconciliation. I would suggest that he wants us to be ambassadors of his forgiveness and reconciliation above all in our families. With St. Francis, we pray, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace."