

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Luke 15:18

I will get up and go to my Father and shall say to him:
 Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

Gospel Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; L33C

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So to them Jesus addressed this parable:

"A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father,

'Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.'

So the father divided the property between them.

After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation.

When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need.

So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine.

And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any.

Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger.

I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him,

"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

Reflecting on the Gospel

Oftentimes we hear today's gospel referred to as the story of the Prodigal Son. But this might be a bit of a misnomer. Even the New American Bible has a different title for this story, calling it the "lost son." The term "prodigal" means "wastefully extravagant," as in, "My vacation spending this summer was especially prodigal, as I was having a good time after working so hard during the previous year." The word has a different etymology from "prodigy," which means "one endowed with exceptional abilities," although sometimes preachers conflate the meaning of the two terms. So when we refer to the Prodigal Son it might be worth the time to clarify what we actually mean by the term prodigal!

But ultimately the story is not so much about the lost or prodigal son. It's not even so much about his brother, though we could call it the story of the two sons. In reality, the story is about the loving father, how the father is a personification of God, and the kind of love God has for us.

The story is sometimes interpreted so that the sons represent Gentile (lost) and Jewish (favored) identities. In this, the Gentiles have lost their way and lived generally wanton lives of decadence, whereas Jews have followed the wishes of God. But in the end both sons, Gentile and Jew, receive the same reward.

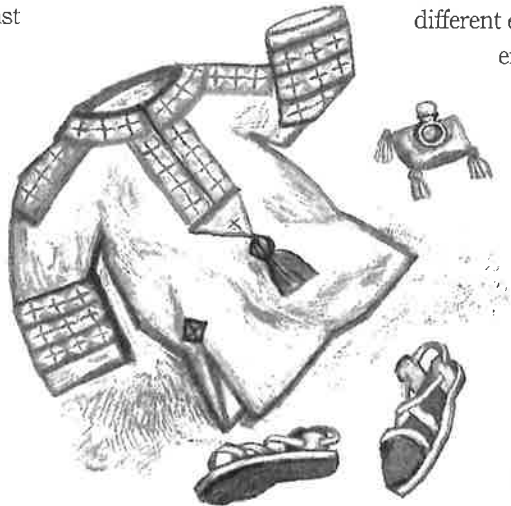
In today's telling, the story is often interpreted more literally, or at least personally, as referring to a wayward person who has ultimately been redeemed. The story is particularly meaningful to many who have lived lives of regret or shame, only to feel the loving embrace of God, a community of hope, a family, or even church upon turning away from their wayward lifestyle.

One of the advantages of a story like this is that it has so many possible interpretations. And this story is told only by Luke. Without him we would know nothing of the Prodigal Son, and certainly nothing of the many works of art inspired by the parable, such as Rembrandt's "Return of the Prodigal Son." There is no sole or singular point to this story. The parable is polyvalent and ought to make us ponder it, as the church has done for centuries.

Living the Paschal Mystery

Redemption and forgiveness are powerful themes, and they are articulated in today's gospel in a particularly dramatic way. These themes are also favorites of Luke, who uses the term "forgiveness [of sins]" more than any other New Testament author. The apostle Paul, for example, never says the word "forgiveness." (And perhaps he should have, as it's a much easier concept to grasp than "justification"!)

Luke is a master storyteller, he crafts a brief but memorable narrative here. The characters are stock: we probably know people like the sons in today's gospel. Do we know people like the father? Would *we* react like the father? Do we react like the father? Though we might or might not have lost wayward children, there are many opportunities to express mercy and loving kindness, and share reconciliation and forgiveness with another. When we behave in this way,



Continued in Appendix A, p. 279.

Year A readings may be used, see Appendix A, pp. 280-81.

we are acting like the father, acting in a way that God acts. Perhaps this is why Pope Francis chose the theme "mercy" for his pontificate. As we learn in today's gospel, mercy is a fundamental expression of God and God's character. Mercy is not merely for God alone: mercy is worthy of emulation.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: While he was still a long way off, / his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion.

To the point: In our gospel Jesus gives us a parable illustrating the abundant mercy of God. The father in the parable respects his son's freedom. He gives him the inheritance he requests and lets him go. But he never stops watching for this son to return home. And when he does catch sight of his wayward son, the father does not wait for the son to complete his journey or to speak the words of contrition he had so carefully practiced. It's as if Jesus wants to tell us that we need only turn toward God for our merciful father to run out to meet us and usher us home.

Connecting the Gospel

to the second reading: The apostle Paul's words in his second letter to the Corinthians are a perfect partner to the gospel of the Prodigal Son and the forgiving father. St. Paul counsels us to "be reconciled to God." Not only are we called to personal reconciliation but also to become messengers of this reconciliation to the entire world. God waits and watches for each one of us individually, and also for the world as a whole to come to our senses just as the prodigal did and realize who we truly are, beloved daughters and sons of God.

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

The psalmist tells us, "Look to [God] that you may be radiant with joy, / and your faces may not blush with shame." Where do you feel shame or guilt over past transgressions? How might you give these emotions to the Lord?

St. Paul tells us we are entrusted with the "message of reconciliation." How does your parish carry out the ministry of reconciliation within the wider community?

Which figure in the parable of the Prodigal Son do you identify with the most at this

Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 31, 2019

Gospel (cont.)

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32; L33C

I no longer deserve to be called your son;
 treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."
 So he got up and went back to his father.
 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.
 His son said to him,
 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you;
 I no longer deserve to be called your son.'
 But his father ordered his servants,
 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him;
 put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
 Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.
 Then let us celebrate with a feast,
 because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again;
 he was lost, and has been found.'
 Then the celebration began.
 Now the older son had been out in the field
 and, on his way back, as he neared the house,
 he heard the sound of music and dancing.
 He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean.

The servant said to him,
 'Your brother has returned
 and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf
 because he has him back safe and sound.'
 He became angry,
 and when he refused to enter the house,
 his father came out and pleaded with him.
 He said to his father in reply,
 'Look, all these years I served you
 and not once did I disobey your orders;
 yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with
 my friends.
 But when your son returns
 who swallowed up your property with prostitutes,
 for him you slaughter the fattened calf.'
 He said to him,
 'My son, you are here with me always;
 everything I have is yours.
 But now we must celebrate and rejoice,
 because your brother was dead and has come to life again;
 he was lost and has been found.'