

In today's Gospel, we heard what may very well be the most famous of parables Jesus told. The story of the prodigal son. Two thousand years after Jesus told this for the first time, we are still captivated by this parable that speaks of God's divine mercy, and two different responses to God's divine mercy, that of the sinner, and that of the self-righteous.

We see this from the very beginning of this Gospel passage. Tax collectors and sinners are coming to Jesus, and the self-righteous Pharisees, begin complaining that Jesus is spending time eating with sinners. Jesus takes this opportunity to address both groups with this parable.

The younger son, of course, represents the sinner. He goes to his father and demands his inheritance. "Give me the share of your estate that should come to me." How self-centered is this? But that is what sin does. St. Augustine defines sin as turning in upon the self. The younger son, in demanding his inheritance is essentially saying to his father "you are as good as dead to me." An inheritance, after all, is not received until after a person dies.

Now how often are we like this? How often do we want to receive gifts, even gifts from God, without entering into relationship with God? Relationships require work. They put parameters on our lives. They demand that we give of ourselves. "No thanks," says the sinner, "I'm going to take the easy, get rich quick route." The father, seemingly oblivious to the younger son's insult, does something quite strange and gives the inheritance to his son. The younger son takes his gifts, and runs off to a distant country. Here the Greek does not quite match up with our English translation. The Greek word μακρός (Makros) is used to mark an extension of space. It conveys the notion that the son went off to a remote or empty space. Isn't that exactly what we do when we sin? We go to an empty space, a void. We move ourselves away from God. That's what the son does.

Well, like most sin, it seems fun at first. The younger son is living the high life. But the reality comes crashing in on him. A famine hits the land. Again, listen to this language. Sin, while fun at first, creates a famine in our lives. Often times we fill that with new sin, but eventually, we realize there is nothing left to satiate our hunger, and we hit rock bottom. People who have overcome addictions often speak of this experience. And that's exactly what happens to the younger son. So he hires himself out to others. This didn't fulfill him either. Jesus is making a very important anthropological statement. We will not find fulfillment in other people. And, more often than not, if we try to do this, we will find ourselves slaves to others, and we will see our dignity insulted. For a Jew, having to feed swine was nothing short of an insult. Finally, Jesus tells us, the younger son comes to his senses. He decides to return home. He knows he has sinned against his father, and he knows he will need to seek forgiveness. He also knows he is not worthy of that forgiveness, having more or less told his father that he was as good as dead to him. But nonetheless, he returns home.

The same is true in our spiritual lives. When we truly realize our own sinfulness, we recognize that we need to turn back to God, and to ask him to take us back, even if only as lowly servants. We recognize that we are not worthy of forgiveness, we did not do anything to merit God's forgiveness. Yet, we know that we have no other choice but to return to God, as we will only find fulfillment in Him.

Fortunately, God's perspective is different than our own. God is infinite love. He does not want to be parted from his creation. God wants to be in union, in relationship with us. He made us for relationship with Him, and He wants us to see that end fulfilled. He does this not for His benefit, but for our benefit. Now let's look what happens.

The son is preparing to return. He wants to be in relationship with his father, and yet he knows that his actions have made that impossible. He has a speech prepared, in which he fully admits that he has sinned against his father. The father, does another shocking thing. He runs out to greet his son. As the son begins his prepared speech, the father doesn't even let him get it out. Instead, the father begins the reconciliation process. He restores the younger son's dignity, giving him a robe and a ring. The father does not respond with wrath, but love. This is an important spiritual insight. When someone has truly converted, when they have truly repented from their sinful life, what they experience is not divine wrath, but divine love. Wrath occurs when we resist God's love. Wrath is what was experienced when the son was feeding the pigs. But upon repenting, what we experience is divine mercy. For us as Catholics this is what we experience in the sacrament of penance. Going to confession is our way of saying I want to leave my sinful past, and return to the father. The father is there, waiting for his son to return to him. In the sacrament, God's mercy is there, waiting to be received. All we have to do is leave our void, and ask for it. It's that easy. In fact it's so easy, that it often bothers people.

The older son in this parable represent the self-righteous who are bothered by divine mercy. "I've never disobeyed you, and you never treated me like you treat this son of yours." What an attitude, huh? But then again, how often do we do this? I think if we are honest, we too, have had this reaction. It seems so unfair, doesn't it, that people who live a life of debauchery, who lie, cheat, steal, etc. can repent, and be given this type of treatment, and we who have never done anything like *that* are treated no better. But look closer at this attitude. Like the younger son, this attitude, too, is a turning in on the self. It is not about truly loving the father. No, it's about me. Slaving for the purpose of being self-righteous is no better than being a sinner like the younger son, or the tax collectors. Both need to stop turning in on themselves. They need to be drawn out of themselves, and into relationship with God not for their own sake, but for the sake of God. St. Bernard of Clairvaux tells us that the highest form of love is to love not for our sake or for sake of another, but for the sake of God, who is love. The older son's mistake is that his relationship with the father was not based on love, but on what was in it for him. I follow your rules so that I will get some reward. The father's laws, God's laws, are not meant to followed for our sake, so that we can get something in a type of tit-for-tat arrangement, but for God's sake. Our motivation should not be what's in it for me, but my profound love for God.

As we continue our Lenten journey, let us repent from the ways we have turned in our ourselves, and seek the Father's forgiveness, perhaps even through the sacrament of penance. Let's strive to enter relationship with God, following His commands not for our sake, but for the sake of God who is love.

Brothers and sisters, peace to you, and to all who love God for His own sake.