

Father O'Connor's Homily for 30 March 2025
Fourth Sunday of Lent – C

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

A young man had gotten into serious trouble and was afraid to face his father. He sought advice from his parish priest, who told him the story of the Prodigal Son and then recommended that he tell his dad the truth and ask for his mercy.

A while later, the young man came back to tell the priest how it all went. The priest asked, “Well, did your father kill the fattened calf?”

“No,” the young man replied. “But he almost killed the prodigal son!”

“Prodigal” means “recklessly extravagant” or “lavish without limit.”

With every good reason, this parable of the Prodigal Son has been called “the greatest short story in the world.” It has, though, some details in it that sound a bit unusual to us. Under Jewish law, a father was not free to will his property as he pleased. The firstborn son must get two-thirds of it and the younger son one-third [Deuteronomy 21: 17]. Though this next detail sounds strange to us, in Jesus' day it was not unusual for a father to distribute his estate before he died, especially if he wished to retire from his family business.

But there was a certain heartless callousness in the request of the younger son. He said, in effect, “Give me now the part of the estate that I will get anyway when you are dead, and let me out of this family business.” The father did not argue. He knew that if this son was ever to learn, he must learn the hard way, and so he granted his request. And, without delay, the younger son received his share of the estate and left home for a “recklessly extravagant” and “lavish without limit” lifestyle in a distant country.

He soon ran through all the money, and he finished up by feeding pigs, a job that was forbidden to a Jew because the law said, “Cursed is he who feeds swine.”

Then Jesus offered our sinful humanity a great insight when He described the younger son as “Coming to his senses,” or “When he came to himself.” Jesus taught that as long as someone was away from God, they were not fully themselves. They only became fully themselves when they came home to God.

So the son decided to come home to his father and plead to be taken back not as a son, but in the lowest rank of the household: the hired servant. In those days, the slave was, in some sense, a member of the family. But the hired servant

could be dismissed at a moment's notice. The hired servant was not a part of the family at all. But the father in the parable never gave his son the chance to ask to be a hired servant. He interrupted him and referred to him as "this son of mine." And he ordered that he be clothed in items that carried deep significance.

The robe stands for honor. The ring stands for authority, for if someone gave their signet ring to another person, it was the same as giving this other person the power of attorney. And shoes: the children of the family wore shoes, but the slaves did not. Shoes were a sign of freedom. [This is the dream sung about in the Spiritual: "I got shoes. You got shoes. All God's children got shoes. When I get to heaven gonna put on my shoes. I'm gonna walk all over God's heaven."] And a feast was prepared so that all might rejoice in the wanderer's return.

Let us stop here and look at two teachings so far in this parable.

First, it probably should never have been titled "the parable of the Prodigal Son," because the son is not the hero. It more accurately should have been titled "the parable of the Loving Father," for it centers more upon **the father's love** than it does on **the son's sins**.

Second, it tells us a lot about the forgiveness of God. The father must have been waiting and watching every day for his son to come home. "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 father forgave him unconditionally. This is very different from a way of forgiving that looks down upon the offender, and forgiveness is conferred as a condescending favor. It is even worse when someone is forgiven, but the memory of their sin is always held over them. By way of contrast, the forgiveness of God is unconditional.

Abraham Lincoln was asked how he was going to treat the Confederate states at end of the Civil War. The questioner expected Lincoln to declare a severe vengeance. But the President instead answered, "I will treat them as if they had never been away."

It is the wonder of God's love that He treats us like that.

But this is not the end of the story. Now enters older brother, who was actually very unhappy that his brother had come home. He stands for the self-righteous Pharisees who would rather see a sinner destroyed than saved. Certain things stand out about him.

His attitude shows that his years of obedience to his father had been years of grim duty and not of loving service.

His attitude shows a total lack of sympathy. He refers to his younger brother not as "my brother" but as "your son." He was the kind of self-righteous character who could meanly kick his brother further into the gutter that he was already in.

He had a lustful mind. There is no mention of “prostitutes” in this parable until he mentions them at the end. He, no doubt, suspected his brother of sins that he himself would have liked to commit.

Once again we have the amazing truth that it is easier to confess to God Himself than it is to our critics. God is more merciful in His judgments than self-righteous people are. The love of God is far wider than the love of human beings. And our God is always ready to forgive, even when other people refuse.

In the face of a love like this, portrayed in this parable of the Prodigal Son, or the parable of the Loving Father, “the greatest short story in the world,” we cannot be anything but lifted up in wonder and praise for the mighty and merciful God that we are privileged to know, to love and to serve.

And that we can rightly call “our Loving Father” too.