

Trinity 9

I take as my text today from St. Luke's Gospel:

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

One of the many things that sets Christianity apart from other religions is the loving relationship between our Heavenly Father and us, his adopted children by Grace. We are not just his creation; we are his adopted children. That bond of love is reflected in the Gospel passage we heard from St. Luke today.

It is perhaps one of the most memorable stories ever told: the story of the Prodigal Son.

Traditionally, it is linked with the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin as part of a trilogy. In this way, it is tied to a central or common theme: that of something lost, yet being found; the effort put into the search; and the joy of finding what was missing.

No doubt, there is the element of the lost being found, but, more to the point, what we find at the heart of the story is unconditional love.

Putting aside the whole concept of the son finding himself and his way back from a life of sin and debauchery, we can see that this is truly the story of a father's love, rather than of a son's sin.

So, rather than call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, let's call it the "Parable of the Loving Father," for who should be the hero of the story? Not the son who loses his way and only through the reality of severe hardship finds himself; but, rather the father whose unconditional love allows him to receive his son back into a loving relationship.

Now, we can begin to understand what is meant by this story being more than just the "lost being found," for here, in this story of the Prodigal Son, we see Jesus telling of His Father's Love, God's unfailing love for us and for all His Creation, and being always ready to receive us back into a right relationship with him, though we may stray and lose our way as we journey through life.

As always, it is helpful to consider the context of the times in which something is written.

At the time of Luke's writing, the law of inheritance, as defined under Jewish Law, going back to the 21st chapter of Deuteronomy, pretty much dictated how a father could leave his property. Essentially, the elder son was to get two-thirds, and the younger son one-third. The father could, if he desired to retire from the management of his affairs, distribute his estate before he died.

What stands out at the beginning of the parable is the callous demand made by the younger son to be given his share immediately; we see his defiance of his father, and his efforts to distance himself from his family.

The parable of the Prodigal Son has been the subject of many a sermon from a variety of perspectives.

While we may see a story told to relate our relationship to God as his straying children, He as our Heavenly Father and we as his adopted children through Grace, we can explore this parable on more than one level without distorting its relationship to the human religious experience.

Jesus began this trilogy with the Parable of the Lost Sheep, followed by the Parable of the Lost Coin, and concluding with the Parable of the Prodigal Son. What He has been demonstrating is the heavenly joy of God the Father over the penitence of every sinner and God's readiness, indeed eagerness, to forgive and receive back into the fold each of us who goes astray.

No matter how far we may wander and how much we may abuse His goodness towards us, God stands ever ready to restore us to righteousness and return our inheritance as His heirs to the heavenly kingdom.

The story is told in terms easily understood then and now: the human relationship between a father and his son. Children rebel for any number of reasons and try to find their own identity outside the family. We, as parents, all too often are unable to do little more than send them off, with or without our blessing, and we watch as they thrash about, squandering, in our eyes, all that we have given them in preparation for their futures.

Of course, there are the children who maintain their family closeness, do as they are expected to do, and never seem to go astray; they do everything right, and we often take them for granted. We may even fail to detect the resentment they may feel toward a rebellious sibling who requires so much of our time and energy.

Jesus uses this basic human setting to demonstrate that, in our spiritual relationship with God, just as in earthly family relationships, there is also a rebellious nature that can lead to separation, with unsavory consequences for our spiritual well-being. Just as in the human family situations where the wayward child is welcomed back to the family, God welcomes each penitent sinner back into a full spiritual relationship.

But there is more to be revealed about this relationship between God and man.

The Pharisees continually murmured at the way Jesus consorted with sinners in His effort to convert them. In light of the joy in heaven over the conversion of just one sinner, this parable demonstrates just how wrong the Pharisees were.

More specifically, in this parable, we can see the father in the story as God; the elder son representing those who think of themselves as being righteous, and who despise others who are less than themselves; and the younger son as all the penitent sinners.

We know the story of how the younger son demands his inheritance, his portion of the goods, his share of the family fortune, and sets out into the world to seek his own fortune, going to a foreign land, and wasting all that he has in a life of extravagance and debauchery.

The fortune spent or wasted, and a famine besetting the land, the son comes to his senses and determines that he will return to his father's house, confess that he has sinned, and ask to be made a servant.

As the son approaches, still far off, his father recognizes him and is overjoyed at his return and gives him a kiss of reconciliation, receiving him back into the family in good standing.

This story of the Prodigal Son forms a basis for our Lord to illustrate the relationship of the sinner to the Heavenly Father.

In parallel, the sinner demands to have under his control his portion of the goods, that is, the whole of his faculties and powers; the same faculties and powers that should be exercised in dependence upon God in his service. It is our free will.

Thus endowed with Free Will, the sinner sets out to exercise his own will and pleasure in the world, deliberately resolved to devote all his powers to the pursuit of pleasure and journeys into the world of sin where God is forgotten. Throwing off the semblance of piety and respectability, he ruins not only his soul, but his health as well.

Having failed even in all his animalistic indulgences to satisfy himself, he plunges deeper into sin by selling himself to Satan.

Finally, unable to satisfy the hunger of his soul, the sinner decides to return to God and ask for a place, any place, the lowest of places, in his kingdom.

Returning, the sinner finds that God, All Loving, has anticipated his first efforts at repentance and is there to receive him back, to give the symbolic kiss of reconciliation between God and man brought about by Christ.

The confession of sin is made and God restores full privileges; there is no need to ask to be made as a hireling, for God loves us and wants us to be in full standing in our relationship with him.

So, as the Prodigal Son is received in love, God receives the sinner. He calls to the ministers of His Church to bring forth, symbolically, the former robe that represents the state of grace before his sin; that former robe in the Christian application being "the robe of baptismal innocence, because in baptism we 'put on Christ' as a garment." Thus, by the ministry of reconciliation, the penitent is restored to his former privileges.

The story concludes with the elder son's display of anger and jealousy over the attention the younger son receives, as he resists the affectionate entreaties of his father to show forgiveness and to celebrate the return of his long lost brother. He is not able to accept that his father can love and honor both sons equally.

The spirit of the elder brother brings to mind those who are caught up "in a round of regular, but loveless, religious practices," who, unconscious of their own failings are quick to cast the sins of others in the worst light. They cannot recognize their own shortcomings, at the forefront of which is their being incapable of forgiveness.

In this parable, as in the two that preceded it, our Lord demonstrates the Tenderness of God. He does so here by making the father the real hero of the story in such a way that can only be related to the Heavenly Father.

We see the human capacity to forgive demonstrated by the father in this story. With so much attention focused on the prodigal son and his repentance, all too often the unconditional love of the father is missed. Without a doubt, the father in the story having unconditional love, and a capacity to forgive with no recriminations should be an example to us all.

Seemingly a simple story, it is filled with all the complexities that thread each of our Lord's parables and sayings.

Yet, despite its complexity, it points out a very simple and compelling truth: the truth of God's very Nature. We learn from the parable that God is Love; that he is our loving Father who has adopted us as his children; and our purpose in life is to love and worship him.

This parable is also the story of our own redemption.

In this one story, Jesus, Himself, tells us that whenever we go astray and wander from God's ways, God is ever ready to forgive and receive us back into full standing as heirs to His heavenly kingdom. It is not a conditional acceptance where we "hire on," but an unconditional acceptance. When we come to ourselves, confess our sins, and strive to return to Him, our Heavenly Father is there to bestow the kiss and receive us back into our adopted family.

Just as the Prodigal Son received a ring symbolizing rank and honor, so we too are restored to our former places; as he received shoes, rather than going barefoot as did the slaves, so we too symbolically receive our spiritual freedom; as the Prodigal Son was honored with a banquet, so we too enter into the heavenly banquet where we are fed with the spiritual food from heaven, the Body and Blood of Christ, which nourishes our hungry souls; and as the Prodigal Son was received in joy that he was alive again, so we too who have died in sin are restored to life again by repentance, and are received once again to life in Christ to the overwhelming joy of all of Heaven.