

March 31, 2019 3rd Sunday of Lent

A Sunday school teacher was telling the story of the prodigal son to his class, clearly emphasizing the resentment the older brother expressed at the return of his younger brother. When he finished telling the story the teacher asked the class, "Who is really sad that the prodigal son had come home?" After a few minutes of silence one little boy raised his hand and said, "The fattened calf?"

Today we hit a crossroad, today we hit a different point, we are now focusing on moving forward, running towards the eventuality of the resurrection. So, we focus a little bit on joy and happiness. We change up the colors, we change up different things. But what we read in the gospel is one of the stories of great joy, and that is what they call The Prodigal Son. This particular parable has more written about it, more talked about it than any other parable Jesus did. I think it strikes home to just about everybody. Some people say it should be called, The Parable of the Loving Father. Other people say it should be changed up to be more modern. But one theologian said, "I would have the younger son say, 'Father, give me my inheritance.'" And then, given his inheritance, he goes to a foreign country and he invests it, he becomes a billionaire. Then the kid wakes up and says, "Wait a minute, what am I doing? I've got to give all this up and go home." That would be more relevant to today's person. What are you really in this life for? Instead the kid is feeding pigs, whereas we would recognize giving up all we have, to go back and make restitution with our father. So, it's really a joyful story and it speaks to up because of the levels that are involved in it.

Psychologists tell us that we have two parts to our being. The persona and the shadow. The persona is the part of ourselves that we like to show to each other and we like about ourselves. For example, we're kind and forgiving. The shadow is the part of ourselves that we don't like, that we try and hide from others. Maybe we're judgmental and critical. But no matter how hard we try and hid the shadow, it refuses to stay hidden. It will pop up with annoying regularity, unexpectedly to embarrass us in front of other people. The key to controlling the shadow, of course, is as Jesus said, is to bring everything to the light; to admit it, to confess it. This is the secret behind the twelve step programs for addictions. The first one was, of course, Alcoholics Anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous has step five which reads, "We admit to God and ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." Well, it's okay to admit to God, it's okay to admit to ourselves, but becomes tremendously difficult to admit to another human being where we are failures, where we have messed up. And that's the hard part. Because of that part, being what it is; God, ourselves and another person, we've seen agnostics, we've seen atheists become Christian because of this step. It's interesting that step five is so important, it helps get rid of unhealthy isolation that secrecy breeds. Another benefit of step five is humility, and we finally see ourselves as we really are, and hopefully will want to change. Being alone with God isn't as embarrassing as being alone with another person. When we're honest with another person, it confirms we've been honest with ourselves and God. It brings us to the sacrament of reconciliation, believe it or not. Step five is modeled after the sacrament of confession. The reason this is, is because when Bill W started Alcoholics Anonymous, he wasn't alone. There was an alcoholic priest along and the two of them worked together. So, Father put this step in there, sacrament of reconciliation, because we all need to be reconciled before we can move on to be more humble. Now the sacrament of reconciliation, we see throughout the gospel, even before Jesus gives the keys to Peter to forgive sins, we see parables talking about reconciliation. God had reconciliation in mind from the beginning. Today's story about the

prodigal son is modeled on reconciliation, or vice versa. The son does the four things we do in the sacrament of reconciliation. First, he examines the situation created by his sin and says, "Here I am, dying from hunger." He is enduring physical hunger, most of the time it is spiritual hunger. Second, he repents what he has done. Swallowing his pride, he says, "I shall go back to my father." Third, he confesses his sin in saying, "Father, I have sinned." Finally, he makes amends by saying, "Treat me as a hired worker not as your son." That mirrors exactly what we do when we go to confession. We examine our conscience, we repent our sins, confess them, and hopefully amend our lives. Now the father in the parable, he does what the priest does in the sacrament of reconciliation. First, he welcomes his son back. He does not stand in the door glaring at him; he runs out and hugs him. Second, he orders shoes be put on the feet of his son. They're symbol of forgiveness, servants went barefoot, sons did not. Third, he put the ring on the sons' finger, symbolizing his reunion with the family. Finally, the father celebrates his sons' safe return home with a banquet. These four things are what the priest does in the sacrament of reconciliation. He welcomes us, forgives us, reconciles us, and invites us to celebrate the Eucharist again with the community. Even more than that, Jesus said, "There's more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner than ninety-nine righteous people." So, when we go to the sacrament of reconciliation and we once again unite ourselves with the Father, heaven is rejoicing; heaven is celebrating. We have a tremendous example of God's love. The father doesn't wait in the house or go about his business. Every day he walks outside and he watches, watches for his son to come back. God watches for us, God waits for us to come back. Not with judgmentalism, not with criticism, but he welcomes us back with love. Makes us sons and daughters once again. This is the part of the story that I think people really like. The second thing is that, we can be forgiven. When the son took his inheritance he told his father, "I wish you were dead." That's a very big insult. It was punishable by death if the father had so chosen. But, he didn't, he loved his son, he let him do it, and then welcomed him back with love. The problem is, there is somebody else in this story and we have to be careful we are not like that. The oldest son, the son has always been there. The son is going to daily Mass, he's going to Sunday Mass, and all of a sudden, somebody who hasn't been to church in forty years comes in, walks in the confessional. God walks in the back with love and puts shoes on his feet, a ring, a robe, and all is copacetic. We have to be careful we're not that oldest son and start judging. "that person was doing this, that person was doing that while I was going to daily Mass, I was becoming a good Catholic, etc. We have to be careful of that. The ultimate example people give, we give is, "You know, Hitler could be in heaven." That really irritates people because, how could he? Look at what he did. And yet, he's a prodigal son. Before he died he could have said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against You, forgive me." And God would have forgiven him. We have to make sure we are not judgmental on other people while at the same time, we too want to be forgiven.

We look at the prodigal son, we look at today, it's a story of joy. Caution but joy. So, we look at this and say, "Wow." Because of Jesus and the resurrection, we now have a chance too, to be reconciled with God no matter how many times we sin and God loves us so much, He will always take us back.

God bless you.