

The Story of the Merciful Father [Luke 15:1-2, 11-32]

The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around Jesus to hear him,
at which the Pharisees murmured,
"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."
So he addressed this parable to them.

[scene 1] "There was a man who had two sons;
and the younger of them said to his father,
'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'
And the father divided his property between them.

[scene 2] Not many days later the younger son sold all he had,
traveled to a distant country, and wasted his property in extravagant living.
When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place in that country
and he began to be in need.
So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country,
who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.
He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything.

[scene 3] When he came to himself he said,
'How many of my father's craftsmen have bread enough and to spare,
but here I am dying of hunger! I will arise and go to my father and say to him,
'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and now I am not worthy
to be called your son. Let me be a craftsman in your household.'

[scene 4] And he arose and came to his father.
While he was still at a great distance, his father saw him and was moved with compassion.
The father ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him.
The son said to his father, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.
I am not worthy to be called your son...."
The father said to his servants, "Bring the best robe and put it on him quickly,
Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet;
Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate,
because my son was dead and is now alive, he was lost and is found."
Then the celebration began.

[scene 5] Now the elder son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house,
He heard the sound of music and dancing.
He called one of the servant boys and asked what this meant. The boy told him,
'Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fatted calf
because he recovered him with peace.'

[scene 6] Then the elder brother became angry and refused to go in.
So his father came out and began to plead with him.
But he answered his father, 'Listen, for all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I never
disobeyed one of your commandments, yet you never gave me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with
my friends.
But when this son of yours comes back, who has devoured your living with prostitutes,
you kill the fatted calf for him!'
The father said to him, 'Beloved son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to
celebrate and rejoice! For your brother was dead and has come to life,
He was lost and has been found.' "

The Gospel of the Lord

We usually call that story the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but a better name might be the Parable of the merciful Father. That character in the story is what the message is all about. He shows us who God is, and what Jesus is like.

Jesus takes the best of his own scriptures -what we call the Old Testament- and sings to us:

♪ Loving and forgiving are you, O Lord, slow to anger,
rich in mercy, loving and forgiving are you. ♪

We are here to celebrate that mercy - to receive the grace of forgiveness, whether we identify with the younger son [who pretty much told his father to drop dead by asking for his inheritance while his Dad was still alive & then went off on his own and messed up his life] or with the elder son [who sat in judgment on both his brother and his father, and refused to forgive or even to receive his father's unconditional love.]

The questions this story asks each of us tonight are:

Are **you** ready to let Jesus forgive you? [*the way the father forgave his prodigal son*]

Are you ready to let Jesus forgive **the ones who have hurt you?**

[*the way the father in the story forgave both of his sons*].

It is not easy to forgive, especially to forgive myself. In fact, I think it is impossible - without the amazing grace of God.

In fact, forgiveness is always God's work within us and through us.

What gets in the way of living the commandment of Jesus

to forgive as we have been forgiven?

First, we confuse forgiving with excusing. God does not want us to *excuse* sin, we need to reject and hate the sin in the world and within us. If we do not resist and reject what is evil, and even curse it, we are colluding with it, cooperating with evil.

What God calls us to do is to forgive the person who sins, even when it is me, without excusing the sin itself, even when it is mine.

Second, we like to sit in Jesus' chair.

We take his job as judge and sit in judgment on ourselves and on others.

The solution: to let Jesus be the judge, as we say he is in the Apostles' Creed . To let him be the judge of both sons, and those who condemned him because he ate with tax collectors & sinners. I often ask people to say these two sentences as a "penance" to be part of the healing they seek: "**Jesus be my judge. Jesus be their judge.**"

We are celebrating the mercy of God tonight - that is the point of our celebration and of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. What is most important is what **God** does.

Admitting that we are sinners is the door that lets the mercy of God & the peace of Jesus into our hearts & minds.

The words of the prophet Joel are God's call to us here & now.

Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart,... Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God. For gracious and merciful is the Lord, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment. [Joel 2: 12-13]

Jesus is singing to us right now:

♪ Return to God with all your heart, the source of grace and mercy;
Come seek the tender faithfulness of God. ♪



Ash Wednesday, 2016

1st Reading: Joel 2:12-18 [Gracious & merciful is the Lord]

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 51 "Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned."

2nd Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2 - [Now is the acceptable time to be reconciled]

Gospel: Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18 [Your Father who sees in secret will bless you]

♪♪ *Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see.* ♪♪

The season of Lent is about the amazing grace of the mercy of God. I read some beautiful words recently about grace and mercy.

They are from a meditation by my friend & brother Franciscan, Fr. Richard Rohr.

"Love has two lovely daughters, twins called grace and mercy. Like identical twins, they are often indistinguishable: Grace is the inner freedom to be merciful. Mercy is grace in action. And both are the children of love."

I remember a lesson in the meaning of grace I received from a Jewish couple. We were responsible for an interfaith service at a national conference for Marriage Encounter. I suggested the hymn, "Amazing Grace," as part of the service. Bob, who was part of the ME team I ministered with, said, "We can't use that song."

When I asked him why, he said, "A good Jew would never call himself a wretch." What I learned that day was that God sees our sin, but does not see us as "wretches."

Sometimes, as we enter into Lent, we forget about God's love & mercy & focus on the ashes on our foreheads & on being wretched sinners. The most ancient creed of Israel - a creed that Jesus lived to his core - is from the book of Exodus: -[Exodus 34:6-7]

Yahweh, Yahweh, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and abounding in faithfulness. For the thousandth generation, Yahweh maintains his kindness, forgiving all our faults, transgressions, and sins.

That is the message of the first reading from the prophet Joel:

Even now, says the Lord, return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, & weeping and mourning. Rend your hearts, not your garments, and return to the Lord, your God. For gracious and merciful is the Lord, slow to anger, rich in kindness, and relenting in punishment.

Joel 2: 12-13

Sometimes we focus too much on the fasting, weeping & mourning, but the core message is about God's mercy: On this Ash Wednesday Jesus is singing to us:

♪♪ Return to God with all your heart, the source of grace and mercy; Come seek the tender faithfulness of God. ♪♪

As we hear the Gospel for today - we can easily focus on the bad behavior of the hypocrites who are pretending to be good and expecting to earn the grace of God and the applause of people.

Yes, we sometimes fall into that trap, but the point of the message of Jesus is: Your Father, who sees what is hidden or secret will bless & repay you. That does not mean that we earn the grace of God, it means that when we admit our need & our sin & our powerlessness, we open a door to God's grace, which is always offered to us.

Perhaps a better way of understanding that phrase is, "Your Father, who sees what is in your heart, will bless you with the Grace he is already pouring out. Only you can close the door from your side by pretending that you can do it without the grace of Christ."

As Paul writes in the 2nd reading, Jesus took all our sins on himself and forgave them - our part is to let him forgive us, and those who have hurt us. And he ends that passage with words that can introduce our ritual of ashes:

"Now is the acceptable time! Now is the day of salvation!"

