

“The Prodigal Son – One More Time!”

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When I opened the lectionary for this week and saw that it was this remarkable but tired story of the Prodigal Son, and “yes! I know”, arguably one of the most beloved parable that Jesus told, yet I sort of groaned and thought to myself “must I preach another sermon on this already over worked parable”.

“A man had two sons...” Everyone knows the story in one form or another. What more might I be able to offer? But in spite of my resistance I am soon caught up with the story again: first because my wife Joy and I have two sons; and then I recall how this story has inspired novelists and playwrights from generation to generation.

The story-line has its roots in The Old Testament and the account of Cain and Able, no doubt inspiring Jesus to begin with. But other great literary works have been inspired by The Prodigal: John Steinbeck’s magnificent “East of Eden” and more recently a marvelous film that coincidentally I watched just last week on the Turner Classic Movie channel “A River Runs through It”. I think of the Great Gatsby, Shakespeare’s tragic “Hamlet” and “McBeth” stories of too much- too soon, of greed and power.

I could go on forever noting the Parable’s massive influence but let’s get down to work and take look at this story “One More Time”.

Could there be two brother’s, raised in the same family, yet totally opposite – “one satisfied to stay-at-home, faithful and loyal – the other bored, adventuresome and rebellious.

Long before he was a big-time loser, the Prodigal Son was a big-time user. He played cruelly on his father’s affections to bend the rules, to jump the line, to claim a portion of the family fortune and then to blow it all on a binge. He starts out in a righteous home and ends up in a pig sty, by way of the flesh pots. Good riddance to bad rubbish. Serves him right. At least that’s the lesson we would expect from a classic morality tale. That’s the way Aesop would have told the story. But not Jesus.

This story is not about a mindless, selfish, irresponsible rebel son, or the reliable, loyal and obedient older brother, or the ridiculous, look-the-other way loving father. It’s about someone else.

Because whether he was using or losing, only one thing about the Prodigal remained constant. He was The Beloved. He was born and raised in love. He abused it and strayed from it. He squandered it and returned broken and sorrowful; begging at best for some miserable scrap of mercy. But that’s not what he found. He walked right back into unbounded love... not a grudging acceptance or a plea bargain, not even tough love with lots of strings attached. His father ran wildly to meet him, to embrace him, to rejoice in him, to love and forgive him. This is unbridled, unreasonable, unimaginable love but it’s real.

In these few familiar lines in Luke, Jesus explains the nature of God and our relationship with him. God is the wellspring of love. And we are his beloved. He loves each one of us in our falls and resurrections. He loves us in the brothel or in the pig sty. He rejoices when we turn to him whether in exaltation or in desperation.

How many times have we acted out this story in our own lives... if not on this dramatic a scale, then repeatedly in squalid microcosm? How many times in so many petty ways have we turned from God only to come slinking back... broken and discouraged? In the tale of the Prodigal, Jesus guarantees us what we can expect from the Father: Unconditional love... boundless joy... divine Mercy.

In the frequent telling of this story, emphasis has rightly concentrated on the repentance of the Prodigal and the forgiveness of the Father. More contemporary reflections also explore Christ's intimate understanding of human nature in what he tells us about the first-born faithful son.

To all appearances, the Prodigal Son and the first-born are two distinct individuals. But real life is often more complicated than that. At different times in our lives we can find ourselves cast in either role. And how seamlessly we can flip from asking forgiveness for ourselves to denying forgiveness for others. So there is a double lesson from this parable. We are not only loved, but we are meant to love. We are not only forgiven, we are meant to forgive. And remember this story is not about us. It includes us and features us. But this story is all about God: pure and simple.

Obviously there are no conditions to unconditional love. But that does not mean that God's love is one-dimensional. Neither is it one-directional. It is always there for the asking. But when we fully embrace it, we get a special grace that tells us we must share it. We must pass it along. We must return it with praise and honor to the Author of Love. To whom much is given, much is expected. That is what it means to be The Beloved.

God love you!