

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT March 14, 2010 C

*I want to express my appreciation to Dr. Thomas Long, Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. I heard him tell the story about the woman and her father on WSB radio which features Day 1 (The Protestant Hour). It was a Sunday morning and I was driving to church with an "unfinished" sermon! As I sat in my car listening to Dr. Long's sermon www.protestanthour.com/03.21.2004.html), I was moved to tears. And as I entered the sanctuary, I needed to ask myself what the tears were about? What did that story evoke in me? I realized in an insightful moment, that **I needed** to trust more deeply in God gracious and generous promise to give me what I need, even if I have to wait until the 11th hour to receive it!*

Luke 15:1-3,11b-32

Jesus tells a parable in today's gospel about the Loving and Forgiving Father. Some of us were introduced to this story as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It's not just about a son who really screws up his life and wastes his father's hard-earned money. It's about the indescribable joy a parent experiences when a child thought lost and dead returns home. It's also about an older sibling as well. He comes in from the fields after working hard all day only to find out from a hired servant that the laughter and music coming from the house is a party his father has spontaneously thrown because his brother is back. "What in the world is going on here," he asks with good reason? (This is, of course, the cleaned-up "pulpit version" of what he probably said!) Why would his father ever even want to see that son of his after what he did to cause so much pain and heartache? A party? Feasting on the fatted calf? His father must be out of his mind. He resents his brother more than ever and is so angry at his father that he refuses to go into the house.

This story is one of several that Jesus tells right in a row in response to some flak he was getting from the Pharisees who were deeply disturbed by the fact that Jesus was eating with sinners. And rather than dwelling on what people were doing while they were considered lost, Jesus tells these stories to reveal who God is. God is like a shepherd, Jesus tells us, who leaves ninety-nine sheep to take care of themselves while he searches and finds the lost one only to call his friends together for a party to wait on and celebrate the return of the lost to the fold. God is like a loving and forgiving parent.

Jesus describes a God I hope and pray we have all met in our lives – a God who's been waiting on us. A God who sees us coming from a distance, eager to embrace us and kiss us, welcoming us with love and forgiveness even before we are able to open our mouths to say, "Most merciful God, we confess

that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone..."

I suspect it's easier to focus on the repentance of the prodigal son than it is to really believe and trust in a God who loves us with such an unconditional love - a Father to whom we pray, as we will before communion: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Most of us can understand why the older brother was so angry about what his father did. It seemed so unfair. His brother didn't deserve a party after what he did. But what does the father do? He does, in effect, the same thing with the older child he did with the younger. He goes waiting on him. He leaves the party to listen to his older son express his resentment and anger, and he responds by saying something like, "Son, everything I have is yours. There has always been a joyful party going on in my heart for you but you haven't known it." He's extravagant with his love for his children, but the oldest doesn't appreciate it or understand it. He can't let go of his resentment toward his brother.

Where are we in this parable?

Are we like the older son? Are there resentments we harbor? Is there anger in our hearts toward some family members who seem favored over us? Are there old grudges we carry? Is it difficult to believe in and accept that we are loved extravagantly for who we are, no strings attached?

Or are we like the younger son? Do we know what it's like to have been lost? Have we experienced the death of some significant relationships which through reconciliation have come to new life? Do we know the joy of being welcomed home with love and forgiveness after some serious breakdowns in our family relationships?

Or are we like the father? Do we offer love and forgiveness freely and generously, with no strings attached? Are we willing to turn our pain and hurt into growth and new life through the power of God's grace at work in our lives?

We don't know whether or not the older son ever understood or accepted the fact that his father was loving and forgiving. We don't know whether or not he was ever able to bury the hatchet in his resentment he had "toward this son of yours," as he told his father. Was he ever able to accept and forgive his brother?

And we don't know whether or not the younger son's conversion lasted or not. Did he change his heart and behavior? Was he able to really accept his father's love and forgiveness? Was he able to forgive himself? I've discovered in life that one of the most difficult things some of us can ever do is to forgive ourselves for what we've done. It's taken some of us a very long time to forgive ourselves for some things we done - long after God has forgiven us.

"Forgiveness is not an end in itself; 'I'm sorry' is not a quick fix; offering and accepting an apology doesn't automatically make everything all right. Sadly, forgiveness doesn't 'forget.' Forgiveness is that difficult first step on the long journey to reconciliation..." (Jay Cormier, Not By Bread Alone 2010).

What this parable is about is reconciliation - and Lent is a season which especially invites us to do the work of reconciliation, which, incidentally, is the mission of the church as found in our catechism: "To restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ" (Catechism, 855).

There's a story a woman tells about her relationship with her father. She said that when she was young, she was very close to her father. The time she experienced this closeness the most was when they would have big, family gatherings with all the aunts and uncles and cousins. At some point, someone would pull out the old record player and put on polka records, and the family would dance. Eventually, someone would put on the "Beer Barrel Polka." And when the music of the "Beer Barrel Polka" played, her father would come up to her, tap her on the shoulder, and say, "I believe this is our dance." And they would dance. One time, though, when she was a teenager and in one of those teenaged moods, and the "Beer Barrel Polka" began to play and when her father tapped her on the shoulder and said, "I believe this is our dance," she snapped at him, "Don't touch me! Leave me alone!" And her father turned away and never asked her to dance again.

"Our relationship was difficult all through my teen years," she wrote. "When I would come home late from a date, my father would be sitting there in his chair, half asleep, wearing an old bathrobe, and I would snarl at him, "What do you think you're doing?" He would look at me with sad eyes and say, "I was just waiting on you."

"When I went away to college," the woman wrote, "I was so glad to get out of his house and away from him and for years I never communicated with him, but as I grew older, I began to miss him.

One day, I decided to go to the next family gathering, and when I was there, somebody put on the "Beer Barrel Polka." I drew a deep breath, walked over

to my father, tapped him on the shoulder, and said, "I believe this is our dance." He turned toward me and said, "I've been waiting on you."

And that's the Parable of the Loving and Forgiving Father! It's about being family. And whether we've been reckless like the younger son or self-righteous like the older one, we have a loving and forgiving Parent, a role model and mentor, who doesn't give us the love we want or think we deserve but, instead, gives us the love and forgiveness we need.

Like the father in the story the woman tells, God faithfully and joyfully says to us, "I've been waiting on you."

Amen.

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