

Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 10, 2013
Readings: Joshua 5:9a, 10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Forgiveness Captured in a Moment.

While in High School I vividly recall a class retreat during which today's Gospel was read as part of a guided discussion. We were asked to share our honest feelings about the account, and not being shy, I proceeded to share that I was struggling with this Gospel because the good son was never afforded even a simple gathering for his friends, even though he was obedient his whole life.

The retreat master seemed frustrated with my answer, wholly unsatisfied with my offering. "You are missing the point," he said, along with an accompanying look of exasperation. I had to reply: "With all respect, I don't think I am—I get the point. I still think however, that even if it is wonderful to welcome back the sinner, the fact remains the older son got completely shut out!" After this, his look of exasperation quickly turned to frustration, and I surmised I had better let it go. Discretion is, after all, the better part of valor.

More than thirty years later, I am quite willing to admit that I did miss the point! Even though I am the youngest in my family, I easily identified with the older brother. I too grew up playing by the rules. What I was missing in the parable was the overflowing mercy of the Father. Some are surprised to learn that the word *prodigal* means "wastefully lavish." We tend to think it means repentant. Yes, he repented, but the prodigal refers to his previous life.

It is risky and perhaps imprudent to try to describe an artistic masterpiece without a visual, but I have been so moved by Rembrandt's mid-17th century depiction of this morning's Gospel, that I feel compelled at least to try.¹ You have seen it I am sure, and I have a photocopy up here on the Communion Rail after Mass.

¹ The Prodigal Son||c. 1669 ||oil on canvas, 262 x 205 cm.||The Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

As you look, you see the father reaching out to embrace his son, whose face remains mostly hidden. They are off to the left of the canvas, while three other unnamed figures occupy the remainder of the scene. It is peculiar that though the principal subject is the relationship between father and son, still the others in the scene outnumber them; but they are not extraneous to the parable.

Several details of the painting stand out. Both hands of the father are placed on the shoulders of the son. It shows that he was fully embracing him, not half-heartedly. We see the son mostly from behind, slightly turning his head to the right and resting it on his father's chest, full of repentance and guilt.²

We also notice that one shoe is off. Was he perhaps running so fast, he lost his shoe? Was he feeling so unworthy that he started to take off his shoes, only to have his father embrace him before he could complete the gesture of humility? Or were the shoes simply so worn out, matching his tattered clothing? I suspect that we are intentionally left to figure it out, along with other details. This makes the painting even more intriguing.

The father's rounded shoulders mimic the arched door behind him, as he leans down to embrace his son. His face is more visibly seen, and the expression and texture of the image itself are soothing and comforting. This is how I hope that forgiveness looks, right there in a captured moment on canvas. Rembrandt hit a grand slam!

Some people are afraid of seeking forgiveness simply because they feel too unworthy to receive it. Intellectually they may understand the sacrament, but psychologically, they cannot bring themselves to accept forgiveness. This is particularly hard to witness as a priest, for

² Constatinos Proimos, 'Forgiveness and Forgiving in Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal Son,' 2011.

we so deeply desire to be inviting and welcoming of all in the confessional. We humans can be our own worst enemies.

Sadly, others are too proud to seek it in the first place, thereby robbing themselves of the grace of forgiveness. And yet, we have never been asked to prove our worthiness, only to manifest our contrition and sincere desire to do better. Turning back to the painting...he visibly jealous older brother aimlessly stares across the way, his hands folded, with a vacuous look of contempt. What must have been racing through his mind? Jealously will do that; it renders us lifeless, sterile and emotionless.

I also notice the other figures in the painting—one that is lurking off in the distance, a safe distance away to be sure. Is it the young man's mother? I am neither an art historian, nor am I attempting to give a lesson here and now. I do know that art can reflect the very best of life and this masterpiece captures so poignantly the transformative power of forgiveness, even as it also shows the utter futility of a life focused on oneself. The other three figures in the scene remain frozen. We do not know what their next move will be.

Laetare Sunday is an appropriate day on which to reflect upon this parable, perhaps Jesus' best known parable in St. Luke's Gospel. We rejoice even in the midst of our long Lenten fast. On *Laetare* Sunday, we see small yet significant signs of joy in the rose vestments, the flowers that adorn the altar, the music chosen for today. Thus, the contrast between *Laetare* and the other Sundays is emphasized, and is emblematical of the joys of this life, "restrained rejoicing" mingled with a certain amount of sadness.

Today, our greatest joy is found in the merciful love of God, the welcoming Father, who is not only waiting for us, but even more importantly, comes out to meet us, offering us his love and grace.