

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 27, 2022 *Your brother was dead but has come to life.*

Readings: Joshua 5:9a,10-12; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

While in High School I vividly recall a class retreat during which today's Gospel was read as part of a guided discussion. Not being shy, when invited, I shared my struggle 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 leader was less than impressed with my reflection. "You are missing the entire point!" he said, along with an equal mixture of disdain and exasperation. I had to reply. "I don't think I am...I get the point. Even if it is wonderful to welcome back the sinner, the fact remains the older son got completely shut out!" Note to self- don't argue with a Retreat Director.

More than forty 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 because 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 word "prodigal" refers to his previous life. I am captivated by a mid-17<sup>th</sup> century painting of today's Gospel by the artist Rembrandt.<sup>1</sup> It's difficult to describe in a large Church, but I brought a print and placed it on an easel inside the Communion Rail if you wish to look more closely after Mass.

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 while the principal subject is the relationship between father and son, still they are outnumbered by the others in the scene; but they are not extraneous to the parable.

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<sup>1</sup> The Prodigal Son c. 1668 oil on canvas, 262 x 205 cm. The Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 act of humility? Or were the shoes simply so worn out, matching his tattered clothing? Perhaps 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 because they feel unworthy to receive it. They may understand the sacrament, but psychologically, they cannot bring themselves to accept forgiveness. This is particularly hard to witness as a priest, for we so deeply desire to be inviting and welcoming of all in the confessional. We 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. The 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? Jealousy will do that; it renders us lifeless, sterile and emotionless.

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<sup>2</sup> Constatinos Proimos, 'Forgiveness and Forgiving in Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal Son,' Art, Emotion and Value. 5th Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics, 2011

One notices several 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 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.

What will be there their next move?

*Laetare* Sunday is an appropriate day on which to reflect upon this parable, arguably Jesus' best-known parable in St. Luke's Gospel. We rejoice even amid 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 emblematic of the joys of this life, "restrained rejoicing" mingled with a certain amount of sadness.

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.