

## LENT SUNDAY 04-C

“The Prodigal Son, The Stubborn Son and The Loving Father”  
(Joshua 5:9, 10-12; Psalm 34; 1 Cor 5:17-21; Lk 15:1-3; 11-32)

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Take a minute to think of all that you have done wrong in your life. What punishment do you think you deserve from God?

Be an ambassador of reconciliation. Forgive as God forgives.

In 1981, a man in a northern village shot his wife and two of her friends to death, in a fit of drunken jealousy. The village went into shock and is still trying to recover. Some have been able to forgive, but some twenty five years later, many still cannot. Each year with the help of local health staff they have a healing circle and that is helping. The man is now out of jail but is still not allowed to return home. For that village forgiveness remains a challenge.

Though I have some objections to the degree of violence in the movie “The Passion of the Christ” by Mel Gibson, there is one moment in that film where he gets it right. Jesus is carrying his cross, beaten, bloodied and half dead, when he meets his mother. He looks up and says simply, “Behold, I am making all things new.” And that precisely is what Jesus is all about – bringing about a new order for the world in a very surprising way – his own passion, death on the cross, and resurrection. The newness is the fact that when he appears to his disciples after his resurrection, there is not a hint of hatred or revenge. Though he still carries the scars of his abuse, there is only peace and joy as he breathes on them his own spirit of forgiveness and mandates them to do as he has done.

That is why in the second reading to the Corinthians Paul can say that in Christ all is made new. In Christ God has forgiven everything and wants forgiveness to be our new way of life, our way of being in this world. He wants us all to become like him, the righteousness of God. We are to be forgiveness, for in Christ, God is revealed as forgiveness. We are sent into a world that does not understand or live this way, as ambassadors to spread this message of reconciliation. That is our challenge.

A teacher in Beauval asked her Christian Ethics students each year to write the story of the prodigal son in their own words, based on their own experience of taking off. Acting out and really hurting their parents. They always managed okay until they came to the part where they came back home, and there they stopped. “That’s not how it is,” they invariably said. “We’re not really forgiven, even if we are accepted back. We are always remembered for what we did wrong.” For parents, forgiveness is also a challenge.

The gospel today meets that challenge. It is really three parables in one - the prodigal son; the loving father, and the eldest unforgiving son. Which character do we identify with the most? Can we see ourselves in all three?

The youngest son, in asking for his inheritance, was really treating his dad as if he were dead. Unfortunately, we usually learn to demand our rights before we learn to value our

relationships. The younger son was acting within his rights, but he was destroying his closest relationships in the process. By his foolish actions and choices, the boy alienated himself from his family, his religion, and his culture. In the Jewish tradition, he was totally gone, lost, without hope.

Finally, he comes to his senses, realizes that he has sinned, and repents. Even in the embrace of his father, however, the son clings to the power of his sin to make him unworthy. He tries to cling to his sin and his identity becomes sinner rather than son, almost resisting the father's forgiveness.

How many of us feel like that, because of our past? One man in the north who was dying of cancer could only see his suffering as the need to pay for his sins. A neighbour did not help by telling him that he was paying for his sins. Often, the last person we are able to forgive is ourselves, because of the harmful consequences of our actions on those we love. Yet in the gospel, forgiveness preceded the confession that was not even needed. The boy was in need of forgiveness, and the forgiveness was there, as unconditional love and acceptance.

Jesus, in telling this story, shocked the Jewish listeners out of their pre-conceived narrow notions of God, and tried to open their hearts to the magnitude of God's incredible love, which goes beyond anything we could imagine. We find it hard to believe, and too good to be true. The father didn't just forgive, he WAS forgiveness. Even as the boy asked, he was forgiving him, and waited patiently for the boy to return to receive that forgiveness and be reconciled with his family again. Rather than punishment, the father honoured the boy's repentance with full restoration of his dignity and place in the family. What a powerful image of God, who waits for us to believe in his love for us, and to come back to him to receive, to enjoy, and above all, to celebrate that powerful love.

The third and saddest parable is the one of the eldest son. Unlike the youngest boy, he had done nothing wrong, yet was worse off in the end, because his problem was one of attitude, of false pride and resentment. Although he stayed home, he has not stayed home as a son. He sees himself as a slave and his father as one who issues commands. He has obeyed these commands but not with the full heart of a son. He works with the calculating mind of a slave, wanting to be paid for his labour. But he sees himself as underpaid and his father as so stingy that he keeps him from celebrating with his friends. Therefore, he lives with a smouldering resentment that has now come to the surface and demands the attention of his father. The real problem is that the older son has turned the free gift of the father into a burden for which there is never adequate compensation.

Here is the contrast between those who want to live by justice and merit, and those who must ask for grace. The parable shows that those who would live by merit can never know the joy of grace. We cannot share in the Father's grace if we demand that he deal with us according to what we think we deserve. The story ends with him standing outside, full of self-righteousness and self-pity, and the father pleading with him to forgive, come in and join the heavenly party. We are left wondering, what did he do?

That question is meant to stay with us. So often we are like the eldest son, full of pride, self-righteousness, unable to see our own sin and how we have hurt others with those destructive, holier-than-thou attitudes, full of denial and blaming others for all our ills. Perhaps even right now, others in our family are suffering because of our inability to see ourselves as we are.

All we have to do is ask our families and friends if there is anything about us and our ways that hurts them, and hopefully they will be honest enough to tell us, if they sense that we are really sincere about wanting to change, and humble enough to listen. Then, we cease to be the eldest son, standing outside in our frigid self-righteousness, and we become the prodigal son, repentant and able to receive God's forgiveness through the community around us.

We are then invited to go further, and *become forgiveness*, like God himself. We are called not just to forgive, but to BE forgiveness. It is meant to be who we are, and that is possible only through the power and spirit of Jesus, who is the forgiveness of the Father made flesh and come to live among us.

John Shea summarizes this gospel as follows: "The revelation of God as grace should make us rejoice. But before we can celebrate, we must deal with the mindsets that the appearance of grace uncovers. We are attached to our past sins, and so cannot quite believe we are sons and daughters of love. This keeps us from joy. We are also alienated from the simple presence of abundance, and so we work for reward and find ourselves resentful and envious. This keeps us from joy. Only when we break the stranglehold of these two blocking mindsets will we hear the music in the house and know that we are home."

Corrie Von TenBoom, who met up with the soldier who had killed her sister in a concentration camp during the war, is a good example for us. She felt revulsion and hatred towards him in her heart, and knew that she was totally incapable of forgiving him, so she prayed to Jesus to forgive him through her, and it happened. She was able to walk up to him, identify herself, and let him know that she forgave him. That incredible experience shook and struck him to the core, and gave him an inkling of who God was for him. It also gave her tremendous release from anger and resentment.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is a meal which makes present that same unconditional, forgiving love of Christ on the Cross for us, and mandates us to be ambassadors of that love.

So, this fourth Sunday of Lent, *Laetare* or *Rejoice* Sunday, let us place our faith and trust in Christ who is forgiveness, and enter into the joy of sharing God's forgiveness for us with all the world as ambassadors of reconciliation.