

HOMILY SUNDAY 24-C
“Celebrate God’s Merciful Love”

(Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14; Psalm 51; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32)

We have just heard three parables proclaimed in the gospel. My definition of a parable is a story that teaches its truth in a hidden way to those who really want to learn it. Let me add another parable to help us appreciate the meaning of the parables in the gospel.

The Lord gave three wishes to a hardworking farmer, on the condition that his neighbour would receive double what he himself received. He asked for a hundred cattle and was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbour received two hundred. Then he asked for a hundred acres of land and was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbour had received two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God’s goodness to both of them, he felt jealous and bitter that God had given his neighbour more than him so he made his third wish – that God would make him blind in one eye. And God wept.

In the light of this Jewish story, and the readings today, who are we? Are we grateful, repentant sinners, or self-righteous persons unable to celebrate God’s mercy?

Genuine repentance and the ability to celebrate God’s mercy, is the key to the Kingdom.

For a good reason, my understanding and appreciation of the readings today has shifted from years previous. My focus in the past was on repentance; now it is on celebration. These stories invite us above all to celebrate the merciful love of our God.

All the readings today have helped me make that shift. Whereas in the past the first reading seemed to be all about idolatry as the root of sin, now I am able to see Moses digging to discover what is most godly in God, his merciful forgiveness, and so God changes his mind, lets go of wrath, and shows Israel infinite mercy.

Whereas in the past Paul’s letter to Timothy spoke to me of Paul’s repentance from his previous behaviour, I am now able to see the real point of his experience – he has found the mercy of God. His whole world-view of a righteous, fearful God has been transformed to one of a God of infinite mercy.

And whereas the parable of the prodigal son in the gospel today used to speak to me of a deep call to repentance from sin and self-righteousness, I am now able to see the focus on a God who is all loving and merciful. That is also the point of the preceding parables of a lost sheep and a lost coin. They help us to discover the deeper call to celebrate the goodness of the loving Father who is God. That is why the last parable should really be called the parable of the loving Father.

The insight that explains this shift in my own thinking is an innocent comment about the numbers 10 and 100 that signify perfection, wholeness and harmony - ten coins; one hundred sheep. Those perfect numbers signify God’s original blessing and plan – to share with humanity a universe of perfect joy, peace and harmony. That dream was marred by the sin of humanity. And now, God is

restoring that dream, one repentant sinner at a time. That explains why God would feel more joy over one repentant sinner than over the 99 that think they need not repent.

God is making us holy through forgiveness. Forgiveness comes to us when we repent. The way to the restoration of God's original vision is repentance. When we return, repent, receive God's forgiveness, and are restored to a right relationship with our God - when that reconciliation happens, God's original dream is being restored and that is cause for God, and us, to celebrate.

Let me add another parable to help us understand this shift. A man was working on a puzzle that had 100 pieces. He was filled with joy as he neared its completion, until he discovered that the last piece was missing. He could not rest and searched every corner of the house until he found the missing piece. When he did, he shouted with joy to everyone in the dwelling that he had found the last piece.

To anyone who is not into puzzles, the missing piece was only a worthless bit of cardboard and paper. To the person working on the puzzle, however, that insignificant piece of paper was the key to completing the puzzle, which he had diligently slaved over for hours. Without it he would have been unable to complete the puzzle and feel that sense of achievement and enjoyment – it would all be marred by the one piece that was missing.

Is that not how God sees us today? That we are all irreplaceable pieces of his original dream that have become lost, either by our sin, or our self-righteousness, that is, our efforts to make ourselves holy. Neither reality allows God to be God, and his creation to be whole, until we repent, return to him, receive his forgiveness, are reconciled with our God, and are restored to our original innocence, which in turn helps God's original dream to be realized.

For John O'Shea, these parables are all about restoring wholeness to what is incomplete; re-uniting what has been divided; making up for what has been lost. God does not blindly accept loss; God goes out searching for the lost one to restore that one to the fold and bring about the original wholeness and completeness of creation. When the lost sheep, coin and son are reunited, heaven and earth are reunited. What reunited them is the joy that things are the way they were meant to be. Creation is fulfilled, and the community is involved – making whole translates into making merry with all the people.

If this is a picture of God's joy in receiving a sinner coming home, then it can also give assurance of God's love to those who face death wondering how God will receive them. In the end we all return home as sinners, so Jesus' parable invites us to trust that God's goodness and mercy will be at least as great as that of a loving human father.

The elder brother represents all of us who think we can make it on our own, all of us who might be proud of the kind of lives we live. 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. Sharing in God's grace requires that we join in the celebration when others are recipients of that grace also. Part of the fellowship with Christ is receiving and rejoicing with others who do not deserve our forgiveness or God's grace. Each person

is of such value to God, however, that none is excluded from God's grace. Neither should we withhold our forgiveness, our grace.

The punch line to these parables is that we, who are like the prodigal son or the elder son, are called to become just like God, like Jesus who recounted the story and who is the God figure in the story. We are to be as merciful as God is merciful. What a challenge!

The first reading helps us to see ourselves as we are and need to become. The first image of God in that reading is actually a humorous, masterful mirror image of ourselves, so often angry, fuming mad, wanting to punish and determined to enjoy our misery. Then Moses pokes away at this wrathful God, gets through to what is most godly in God, and God changes his mind – he becomes his true merciful self and a second truer image of God emerges. That is the transition to which we all are called by the Word of God today.

Abbot Anthony had a book of very fine parchment that was worth twenty shekels. It contained both the Old and New Testaments in full, and he read from it every day. One day a certain monk came to visit him. Seeing the book, he made off with it. The next day, when Abbot Anthony went to his Scripture reading and found the book missing, he knew the monk had taken it. Yet he did not send after him, fearing he might add the sin of lying to that of theft. Now the monk went into the city to sell the book and asked 18 shekels for it. The buyer said, "Give me the book so that I may see if it is worth that much money." With that, he took the book to Abbot Anthony and said, "Father, look at this book and tell me if it is worth as much as 18 shekels." Anthony said, "Yes, it is a fine book and at 18 shekels, it is a bargain" So the buyer went back to the monk and said, "Here is your money. I showed the book to Fr. Anthony and he said it was worth 19 shekels." The monk was stunned. "Was that all he said? Did he say nothing else?" "No, he did not say a word more than that," replied the book-buyer. The monk then told him that he had changed his mind and didn't want to sell the book after all. Then he went back to Abbot Anthony and begged him to take the book back, but Anthony said gently that he was giving it to him as a gift. But the monk told him that if he did not take it back, he would have no peace. After that, the monk stayed with Anthony for the rest of his life – he had experienced something of the mercy of God through Abbot Anthony that changed his life.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is our food for this inner journey into repentance, forgiveness and healing that restores God's kingdom little by little. It is also a foretaste of that eternal banquet when all creation will be reconciled with God and God will be all in all.

So, have faith, repent from the heart, and celebrate the mercy of our loving God, for that ability to celebrate is the key to the kingdom

Here are some questions we can ask ourselves as we ponder the message today:

1. What is my idolatry, my favourite sin?
2. Who do I identify with in the story: the youngest, or eldest son, or the loving father?

3. How easily can I share in and celebrate another person's good fortune?

Here is a ritual that we can do with others after hearing the readings today:

Place a piece of blank paper on your heart; mentally place on it your sin and sinful attitudes, then come up and light it with a candle. As it begins to burn, place it on lit charcoal and add incense so that it burns and joins with the incense joyfully rising to God as a symbol of your desire to celebrate God's loving mercy.