

Homily
March 27, 2022
4th Sunday of Lent / Laetare Sunday
23:04 – 32:57

We have just heard proclaimed one of the most memorable parables of all the parables that Jesus tells throughout the Gospels. And it is unique to Luke's Gospel account. It's found nowhere else.

A parable. We've heard this before, but I'd like to remind us. A "parable" is a *teaching story*. It's a story *of the moment* that the storyteller tells to respond to some reality in which the storyteller stands and witnesses. Parables have no back story. There's no prequel. And parables have no sequels: one, two or three. They just stand by themselves as a response to a particular situation. And all parables are aimed at the truth. They have a lesson to take to heart.

Now, this particular parable, since I was ordained a deacon in 1982, has come around 14 times. And this week as I was pondering and reading some commentaries on it, I suddenly realized, "Ginther!" (That's me.) "You **missed** something. All these times, you missed parallels that are significant. That are the context and the story, bound together."

So I want to just take a look at those parallels today with you, for they are very telling.

What's the background? What's the setting? Well we have on the one hand, tax collectors and sinners. On the other hand, Pharisees and Scribes. And Jesus.

What's the story? Well, who are the players, really – the father and the two sons. Some commentators say that it would really be better rather than calling it the "Prodigal Son," to call it the "Father and Two Sons." Whatever.

The son, the younger is profligate. He squanders things. He is like the tax collectors and the sinners who have found squandering in their life. One can wonder why the son returns to the father. He walked away. Why return?

Well, perhaps it was shame. He was ashamed of himself. And as a friend of mine last night at dinner reminded me, how deep was the shame? Well, **he had to care for swine**. And since this parable is told to Jews, they would have gone, "yeeunghk!" Perhaps that was his motivation. He'd finally gotten so shamed that he needed to return.

Perhaps it was his stomach. He was starving. All right?

But there's something more here. Perhaps his motivation was an inkling of his father's love. He's already witnessed his father's indulgent love because when he asked for his half of the estate, the

father gave it. And then he let him walk away. Perhaps he was thinking of that, as well. And when he came home, he found that indulgent love all over again, didn't he?

Then there are those who are righteous: the Pharisees and the Scribes and the older son. We see what happens with the older son. He witnesses a party going on. He finds out it's that *younger brother*, back. And he refuses to enter the house. He's full of anger. And he directs it to the father. He does something that is a great insult in the ancient near east. He does not go in to the father, he forces the father - by his refusal to enter - to come out. You don't do that to an elder in the ancient world.

What was the older son's motivation for such behavior? It seems as though he saw the father as a task master: one to be served, one whose orders were to be followed. And based on that, there was a relationship of *quid pro quo*. "I do this for you; you do that for me." Indeed, the older son finds the father's loving indulgence offensive. For it is not quid pro quo. It doesn't make sense to him that the father could be that loving.

I still am fascinated by this parallel. We have the son, the younger son. We have the tax collectors and the sinners. They are seeking, these tax collectors and sinners, as the Gospel tells us. They are seeking. And the son is coming home. Seeking refuge. By the father, the son is embraced and welcomed in his return – no less than Jesus welcoming those who seek - tax collectors and sinners.

In contrast, we have the older son and the Pharisees and the Scribes. The Pharisees and Scribes sneer at Jesus because he welcomes sinners and eats with them. The older son is angry with the father. He doesn't see the father's response in love. Nor do the Scribes and the Pharisees see Jesus' response in love. They only see what they think should be and no more.

The lesson here my brothers and sisters ultimately - that underlying truth of the parable - is reconciliation. **Reconciliation**. Its purpose is to get at the root of what needs to be healed. Let me repeat that. **Its purpose is to get at the root of what needs to be healed.** And to get there, the parable shows us very clearly, as do the actions of Jesus, that it requires compassion, mercy fueled by an indulgent love. And it's not just the emotion of love. It's seeing the dignity of the person even as a sinner and reaching out. It's a decision that the father in the story gives to **both** sons: **indulgent love AND indulgent patience.**

I'm fascinated by this parable. And it took me 40 years to come to this. – "The light goes on!" I hope that parallel can speak to all of us and help us to embrace the powerful loving mercy of our God.

