



WEEKLY GOSPEL REFLECTION



Fourth Sunday of Lent, Cycle C

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"...let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" Luke 15:24

Chapter 15 of Luke contains three parables of mercy: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. All three demonstrate the unexpected and extravagant nature of God's abundant forgiveness and call for reconciliation. Today we consider the actions of the two sons.

Imagine the reactions of the scribes and Pharisees to whom the parable was first addressed. Put yourself in the crowd, and note your own reaction to the unexpected points of the story. The father represents the self-giving spiritual reality of God and the two sons symbolize two polarized states of life in our Community. The younger prodigal son is lost in sin and the older son lost in self-righteousness. The loving father works to bring healing and reconciliation.

The "far country" in the story represents the movement from a life of grace to abandonment of love and disconnection with the father. The squandering of the inheritance is the final action of separation. The son, once of princely stature, is reduced to that of a hireling. He not only tends the swine but takes on the identity of the pigs, even to the point of desiring what they "feed on." He is ultimately reduced to mucking and wallowing in self-pity stench.

The older son, representing the scribes and the Pharisees, is likened to the grim and dismal worker in the field. He is not accustomed or even attracted to the sound of music and dancing. He considers the celebration to be an insult for it is the waste of a productive day. There is hard work to be done. Head bent low, his is a posture of denial and sacrifice, even to the point of blocking out the glorious illumination of the sun. But this constant scrupulous negative attitude leads to the hurling of insults, but this cannot keep the father away.

The father's point of view is that all three are meant to be harmoniously and joyfully together as one. Both sons are meant to live in the House of the Lord. By his presence, the father extends the invitation to celebrate and be joyous. Celebration is the natural outflow of divine love. God seeks the grim worker as well as the lost. Both are dead, and he brings the dead back to life. In his presence, we cannot help but burst forth in celebration.

This parable is to be told to those who are scandalized at Jesus' association with sinners. Thus the end of the passage, the part about the elder brother, is a key part of the story. The question to ponder is whether the "righteous" will join hands with the "sinners" and enter into the celebration, sharing God's joy at the reconciliation of one another.

In every generation there is danger among "good people" to look down on others. The devil, as Deceiver and Divider, tempts us to feel "*holier than thou.*" In reflection this week, let us recall that we are all sinners, yet recipients of God's generous mercy, and that our proper response is gratitude. As we remember *who we are*, and *whose we are*, let us rejoice at the *lost that are found*. Let us come to the table of plenty to join hands and be the bread of life and chalice of blessing in communion with Christ.

A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Luke.

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, *"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

So he told them a parable:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.'"

So the father divided his property between them.

A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country, and there he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs.

The young man would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; but no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, *'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."*'

So he set off and went to his father.

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Then the son said to him, *'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*

But the father said to his slaves, *'Quickly, bring out a robe -the best one- and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!'* And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. The slave replied, *'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.'*

Then the elder son became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

But he answered his father, *'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'*

Then the father said to him, *"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."*