

Fourth Sunday in Lent

MMXIX

Often a passage of Scripture becomes so well known & loved that it stands alone in our mind – which means that we often forget the context in which it appears. Note first, then, that Christ delivers today’s parable as his answer to a complaint from the scribes & Pharisees. Second, note that what vexes them is how certain people with reputations ruined by sin are now – and this is the only place in the Gospels where this verb is used to describe people coming to Christ –

...drawing near to hear him.

That simple expression, *drawing near*, carries much weight; it signifies how tax collectors, instead of hanging back with the larger crowd, are actually moving into the Master’s inner circle. They are getting so close to Jesus that, when the lecture is over and others have left, they stay around and get to break bread with him! Now, to the scribes and Pharisees it is fine if such people wish to join the audience that Jesus attracts – but surely Jesus has no business inviting them to dinner.

The Pharisees’ behavior foreshadows that of St. Peter some years later. In Galatians St. Paul describes how Peter wrongfully caved in to the demands of other Jewish Christians whose view of uncircumcised converts was, in effect, this: “We are glad Paul has brought those Gentiles to believe in Christ Jesus – but that doesn’t mean we can actually break bread with them.” And just as Paul at that later time would have to rebuke Peter face-to-face, so now the Parable of the Prodigal Son is our Lord’s rebuke to the Pharisees and scribes.

The parable opens with a young son who does not merely lack the self-discipline to manage money – he completely fails to understand what riches are his in being his father’s son. He thinks it means money – getting to inherit when the old man dies. And because this is how he sees things, it seems perfectly logical to ask now for his share of what there is. The younger son’s decision is, in other words, just like the choices we make concerning a life insurance policy or pension.

But the young man is being totally oblivious to the fact that his father has been not just providing him with stuff, but truly & generously caring for him ever since he was born. And why? Because his

father dearly loves him. The love itself is far more valuable than any material token of that love. To this man his son is not an account-holder, a legal dependent, but his offspring, his own flesh & blood. There is no end to what he would do for his son.

So it is with a callous heart, with complete blindness to the truth, that the son leaves; and he shows no sign at all of even suspecting that what he has done has hurt his father deeply.

My fellow Christians, when you sin against God, do you think about your sins in this way? For God is not merely a judge who finds you guilty when you transgress his laws. God is not only holy & just, whose reaction to your sin is nothing but righteous anger. The God who made you is your true heavenly Father, and he has always loved you. He created you with a mind & soul to live in communion with him, and has redeemed you in Christ so that you may love him and serve him in thanks for all his goodness. When you or I sin we truly grieve the heart of a God who loves us. Consider the outcries of the prophets, such as these lines from Hosea:

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?

Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.

Or these uttered by Isaiah:

Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?

Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

Even when the prodigal son decides to go home, is there any word from his lips indicating that he now realizes how wrong he has been in his thinking, and how he has wounded his father's heart? No. Instead, he sounds like a politician figuring out how he can apologize for his wrongdoing, but in such a way that it won't hurt his chances of being re-elected.

“OK, Father, here's the deal. Yes, I made some bad choices, and I am sorry for any harm I may have done to you or others. However, I realize that now and am willing to work on your estate as a μίσθιος (misthios).” In other words, give me a job and I can at least make good on my mistake by working for

you. After all, the only money I lost was going to be mine, anyway.”

To this attempt at bargaining the father pays zero attention, however – not because he is angry and must teach his son a lesson, but because at this moment he himself is overcome with love & relief at finding his son alive and back home.

Now, our Lord Jesus spoke in parables to teach us about the Kingdom of God – which means that the parables are not so much about us as about God himself. The Prodigal Son is no exception to this, and here is how we can tell:

At the end of the story, does the son come to understand? We never find out. When the older son arrives on the scene and protests the father’s action, he also reveals that he has been laboring under a grave misunderstanding. When his father corrects him, does he see the light? We never learn. The final lines of the parable belong to the father, because the purpose of the parable is to teach us about the loving, merciful, forgiving heart of God.

Who needs to hear this parable? First, the child of God who has thrown away his or her inheritance in Christ, and cannot figure out a way to go back and enter the Father’s house. May that person come to realize that just as no bargaining is possible, none is necessary.

Second, any Christian must comprehend this parable who intends to reach out to such a spiritually lost brother or sister; for in this parable we find the true terms, and the right tone, in which to urge, “Come home.”

Finally, the point of this parable must penetrate the heart of that dutiful Christian who, perhaps, tends to view their Christian life purely as a duty, and who may even take great pride in how he or she has served – God is my boss, and I work for him. Our creation by God in his image was the act of an Almighty, heavenly Father – an act of love. Our redemption by Christ was the self-sacrifice of our true Brother, to reconcile us again to the Father who, because he so loved the world, sent him. And the Spirit who dwells in us – who teaches us in Christ to cry out, “*Abba*, Father,” thereby reminds us that we live not under Law, not as slaves, but in the freedom of having God’s constant mercy, his daily

forgiveness, and an inheritance kept for us toward which our hopes are aimed. His household is one to which no child lost can return again without finding God's warm embrace, along with a banquet at which even his angels are heard singing for joy. ☩