

CONNECT! SUNDAY REFLECTION

4th Sunday of Lent | For Sunday, March 27, 2022

Mercy, Compassion, Generosity, and Patience

Written by Br. John Marmion Villa

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32



The story of the Prodigal Son is familiar to all of us. We've heard it time and again. But sometimes we forget to look at the situation out of which this famous story comes. The beginning of today's passage sets the scene. There were two groups of people around Jesus: the first group were the tax collectors and sinners, the second were the Pharisees and the scribes. It's most interesting to me to note which verb is used by the text to describe the action of these two groups: the verb used to describe the action of the first group is "were drawing near," the verb used to describe the action of the second is "began to complain." We can surmise that one group was interested in what Jesus was saying, the other group wasn't.

Pope Francis gives a striking insight when [he comments](#) about the religious professionals of Jesus' day. "Belief in God and worship of God are not enough to ensure that we are actually living in a way pleasing to God ... paradoxically, those who claim to be unbelievers can sometimes put God's will into practice better than believers."

But I'm curious about the pronoun used in verse 3 — who is the "them" that this parable is addressed? The first group? Or the second? I think Jesus was talking to both groups at the same time.

Perhaps both groups can be represented by the two sons in our story, the younger one and the older one. The younger one would eventually recognize his sinfulness and "draw near" to his father in that tender moment of return. The older one's tone of voice has an edge of complaint in it if you examine it closely.

If we are honest with ourselves, we have the heart of both sons within our own. We cycle between repentance and arrogance (or stiff indifference at best) in the spiritual life. But more poignant than that is the steadfastness of the father's character in his dealing with both the sons. It is the father's person that is the striking character in the story. What mercy and compassion are lavished on the wayward son! What patience and generosity given to the older son! And so God the Father is with us!

Why does the Church give us this familiar passage to reflect upon during this season of Lent? Perhaps, it is given to us to remind us that both sons in our story have sinned, both experience the magnanimous character of the father, and I imagine that both are changed by it as they both are welcomed into the father's house for the celebration. I can only imagine what the conversation was between these sons in the days following the party. They gave witness to each other of how they found themselves at the celebration.

We are all prodigals who have left the Father's house in reality (like the younger son) or in our hearts and mind (like the older son). We all have stories of being proverbially lost and running in the wrong direction. But it helps us to be reminded that others are on the narrow path of faith as well. When we hear testimonies of how people overcame personal struggles, we are encouraged. If others can find God's mercy in their troubles, then so can we.

The stories I've heard from people over the years are all unique ... some are dramatic, others are poetic, and others are 'normal.' I am encouraged and edified by all the stories I've heard because it shows me that Christian faith has become real for these people. It also shows me how faith in Jesus transcends all human labels of people, limitations of personal character, and rationalizations of ideology. So, what's your personal story of faith? How have you "drawn near" to Jesus, or how has he drawn near to you? Who needs to be encouraged by your testimony of what Jesus did in your life?

Br. John Marmion Villa

PRAYER

Heavenly and almighty God,
I come before you, humble and sorrowful,
aware of my sin, and ready to repent
and change.
Lord, forgive me for I have sinned against you.
Wash away my sin, purify me,
and help me to turn from these patterns of sin.
Lead me to walk in your way,
leaving behind my old life and starting
a new life in You.
Lord, you who are loving and just, show
compassion upon me,
shower me with your mercy.
All this, I pray through your Son, Jesus Christ,
who came to save us from our sin.
Amen.