

Fourth Sunday of Lent – Year C (Mar. 21, 2004)

This fourth Sunday in Lent is called Laetare Sunday. Laetare means Rejoice in Latin. So today our Liturgy tells us to rejoice, not because Lent is half over. Rather perhaps because we are closer to the celebration of the Resurrection, the foundation of our faith. It's more likely however that our reasons for rejoicing can be found in today's readings, whether it's hearing how the Israelites received God's loving care during their wanderings in the desert, how God forgave them their infidelities, and how they rejoiced at God's kindness; or how God's unbounded love was showered upon the Corinthians, as Paul reminds them, reconciling them to one another and then making them ambassadors of reconciliation, spreading the good news of God's mercy among their neighbors; or most prominently in the story of the Prodigal Son, where once again the forgiveness and unconditional love of the Father represent the love of God for us even when we have sinned.

I have heard this story called the Gospel in miniature since it represents the heart of Jesus' teaching and ministry: forgiveness, reconciliation. We usually call this the story of the Prodigal Son, but some people think it should be called the prodigal Father since he is so generous, understanding, and forgiving. After all he did not have to give his son what he asked for. To do this was unheard of in the ancient world. That's one of the factors that would surprise Jesus' listeners and make them sit up and take notice. Another was the father's willingness to receive his son back without recrimination or punishment. Neither one of these things would have happened in the culture Jesus lived in. The father's action would be unbelievable to the people listening to Jesus. The father's action is unbelievable – until we realize that Jesus is really talking about God, his Father and our Father. A prodigal Father indeed.

But what in fact was the sin of the son? As we read the story it seems to be the fact that he squandered his father's money in loose living. But I have my own take on the story and just what the son did that was wrong. I think his sin was that he broke up the family. Families were very close knit in Jesus' time, and the younger son destroyed that unity. That's what sin does. That's what evil does. It divides. The younger son said, "Bye-bye,

Dad. I'm going off to see the world and have a good time. So long, big brother. You stay here and take care of the farm." So, off he went, lost all his money and lost his friends as well and found himself starving and reduced to feeding pigs, one of the worst things that could happen to a Jew. I once read an old rabbinic saying to the effect that cursed is the man who feeds swine and cursed is the father who teaches his son Greek philosophy. I don't know what the connection was between feeding pigs and Greek philosophy but apparently the rabbis did not approve of either one.

Anyway we know the rest of the story. The son comes to his senses and returns home after planning to ask his father to treat him as one of his hired hands. The father sees his son coming home, runs out, throws his arms around him, and kisses him. He is so happy to see him. The fact that he was watching for him means that he must have expected him to return and waited anxiously for the moment when this wayward son would appear. So he throws a party to welcome him back and invites in all the neighbors for a celebration. "My son who was dead has come back to life," he says. "He was lost and has been found."

Ah, but then there is the elder brother. He hears the music and dancing and becomes angry. He refuses to come in to the party or to be reconciled with his brother. The Father is very eager to have the family made whole again so he goes out to persuade the elder son to come in and join the celebration. But he will not. He says, "I've always done the right thing and this son of yours who wasted your money living riotously comes home and you kill the fatted calf for him." And here I think we can see the real reason for the story. Remember those scribes and Pharisees we heard about in the beginning of the Gospel passage, the ones who were complaining that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners? Well, it seems to me that Jesus is inviting these people to join the party also, to be reconciled, to bring wholeness and unity to the people of God and not to stand at a distance judging and thinking that certain people were not worthy of their company. This is what Jesus came to do: to restore the unity that had been destroyed by sin.

Barbara Reid, a scripture scholar, commenting on this parable, says it is both comforting and challenging. "From the perspective of the one who is in trouble, all that is necessary as a first step – which is often the hardest

– is to be willing to accept such gratuitous love and let oneself be embraced by God’s tender arms.” Because that’s what the story is really about. It’s about God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness. It invites us to accept that love, mercy, and forgiveness and then share it with others, particularly those with whom we need to be reconciled. It invites us to join the task of restoring the unity that God intended from the beginning, to become, as Paul says in the second reading, “ambassadors for Christ.” It’s a comfort and a challenge for all of us.

Now it seems only too evident that the world we live in needs a great deal of reconciling. We probably think immediately of the Israelis and Palestinians, of the situation in Iraq, or of the Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland, and we wonder what we can do to help these situations. Well, I believe that reconciliation like charity begins at home. We begin by making sure that we have forgiven anyone who has offended us and we ask for and accept forgiveness of those whom we may have offended – and I think that is the more difficult thing to do. But I also believe there is a ripple effect. We make sure that all is right between us, our family, our neighbors and friends, and that will influence what goes on in the wider world around us. Because of all the connections that link us one to another, there is nothing for good or for ill that does not affect everything and everyone else. At least this is what I believe. An act of kindness, of forgiveness here in Georgetown can be felt on the other side of the world. And that, dear friends, is how we truly become “ambassadors of Christ.”