

4th Sunday of Lent “The Father, Son, and Elder Brother”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Peace be with you! Whenever I hear the parable of the prodigal son, I ask myself, who do I identify with right now? Don't you? There are so many choices. We have the lost wayward son returning home, we have the father who rejoices, we have the elder brother who disapproves, we have other family members and servants looking on, just spectators, who do we most identify with right now. I don't know about you, but my first instinct is to identify with the lost son returning home to the forgiving father. I think most of us does that, right? Catholic guilt? It is Lent after all, and during his ministry, the Lord accentuated our need for repentance. However, before we identify with the wayward son, we should give the elder brother his due. The sin that the son committed against his father was truly horrible, even unthinkable. Why?

Henry Nouwen wrote a beautiful book entitled, “The Return of the Prodigal Son”. Have any of you read it, or perhaps listened to it read? It is a must. To better understand the implications of the son's request of his father at the beginning, Nouwen quoted the work of Kenneth Baily, (and anthropologist I believe), who wrote, “For over fifteen years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has always been emphatically the same...the conversation runs as follows. Has anyone ever made such a request in your village? Never! Could anyone ever make such a request? Impossible! If anyone did, what would happen? The father would beat him, of course! Why? The request means – he wants his father to die.”

The son's request is awful, signifying his desire to be completely cut off from his family name, from his home, and even from his identity as a son. In place of the identity given to him at his birth, he wants to define his own identity by following his own desires and his own design. He exchanges the unconditional love of his father for the very conditional love of the world around him. The father says, “I love you unconditionally”, but the world says, “I love you IF you are good looking, I love you IF you are intelligent and I love you IF you are wealthy. I love you IF you produce much, sell much and buy much.” Because we can never ultimately measure up to the world's IF's, the world's conditional expectations, Nouwen writes, “As long as I keep looking for my true self in the world of conditional love, I will remain “hooked” to the world – trying, failing, and trying again. It is a world that fosters addictions because what it offers cannot satisfy the deepest craving of my heart.” Addictions like the accumulation of wealth and power, the attainment of status and admiration, the lavish consumption of food and drink, and sexual excess. Nouwen writes, “As long as we live within the world's delusions, our addictions condemn us to futile quests in ‘the distant country’”. We have wandered away from our Father's home, much like the son who departed from his father's home in a false search for individuality. The son comes home to the father emaciated and disheveled, shredded by the lies of what this world tells us about what it looks like to be successful.

Lent is a great time to ask ourselves, how are we like the wayward son? This can call us to conversion. However, Nouwen suggests something profound. What if we are more like the elder son than his younger brother? I'll use myself as an example. I can say that I have been a rather obedient son to my father and mother. I am a law-abiding citizen, although, I may have gotten a speeding ticket or two or three. I am not someone who cursed my parents and headed off for a life of debauchery. That isn't me. But I might be more like the elder brother in this story. And I think many of us can probably feel the same way. If we have ever held a grudge against someone or have found ourselves being overly judgmental or critical of others, perhaps upon reflection we can see ourselves more like the elder brother who is critical of his father's affection toward his younger brother. The parable therefore also invites us to ask ourselves, how are we like the elder brother, to a family member, a coworker, to those on the peripheries of society? How often do we harbor grudges against others, judgmental of the father's love and forgiveness?

Lent is a great time to ask ourselves, how are we like the elder brother? Nouwen suggests, however, even something more profound. Whether or not we can identify better with the prodigal son or the elder brother, we are all called to be more like the father who embraces his wayward son. We are challenged to identify with the father, who although is wounded by the sins of his son, nevertheless pines for his son to return. He is hurt by the sins of one so close, but rather than holding a grudge, he prays rather for his son's conversion. Although the forgiveness cannot happen until the loved one comes home, the father nevertheless prays for that day, every day. When the son returns, it is like Easter morning, "my son was dead and now he is alive. Thanks be to God."

Of course, that all sounds nice. However, can we take a moment and consider the profound implications of what it really means to be like the father in this story? This parable asks the difficult question of all of us, can we be more loving to the people who have sinned against us? Can we be more loving to those who have hurt us, in the sense that, do we even want them to have reconciliation with Christ, or with us for that matter? Brass tacks, are we on the hill looking out at the countryside every day, pining desperately for their conversion and for their return? It is only human to conclude that such love is impossible. However, it is in that moment when we think that kind of love is impossible that we are confronted face to face with Jesus on the cross, wounded by our sins, and yet loves us anyway with an irrational love that can only be described as supernatural.

I hope by now that you agree with me that the parable of the prodigal son is extremely rich with meaning. I therefore invite us to take time this week and pray with Luke chapter 15 and ask ourselves, who are we in this story? How are we more like the sinful wayward son? How are we more like the elder brother? How are we more like the forgiving father? Once we have meditated on these questions, we may then be prepared to ask the ultimate question this parable poses as we journey closer to Holy Week. Namely, what does it mean for you and me to become more like Jesus?