

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

Josh 5:9a, 10-12

Ps 34:2-7

2 Cor 5:17-21

Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

We hear that very familiar story of the Prodigal Son. This parable has touched many hearts because it calls to mind how some people have wandered far from God, realized their mistakes, and returned to God. For those that have returned to God after being away from Him for so long it is a message of God's mercy and compassion.

We have three main characters in this parable. The younger son wanted his inheritance. He took his money and traveled far away from his family. We have to remember that there were no modern modes of communication in those days like we enjoy today. So, when it says that the younger son traveled to a distant country it was like saying that he was gone for good. Almost like he was no longer part of the family. It wasn't until the younger son was broke and desperately hungry that he even thought about his family. We get the sense that he only came back to his father so that he could get something to eat. We can almost see the ungratefulness in his actions.

The older son is a different story. We can see the coldness of his heart. He doesn't even call his brother "my brother", rather he says "your son". He is angry that his brother has returned. It makes it sound like he didn't care that his brother was gone. When his father begs him to come into the party the older son can only think of himself. "You never even gave me something in which to party with my friends." The older son was always obedient to his father and he wanted to know what he was going to get for it. There is no sense of love for his father.

How does the father react to his two ungrateful sons? He is overjoyed that his younger son has returned. When his younger son traveled to a distant country it felt like his younger son had died. The father experienced grief in his heart. The loss of his son weighed heavy on him. When his son returned it was like his son had been resurrected from the dead. He was alive again, and he had his son back. He couldn't help but celebrate.

The father is patient and compassionate with his older son. Despite his son's rudeness the father is very loving. He tries to explain that "everything that I have is yours." This shows that the father always saw a relationship with his son as one of a mutual life. What's mine is yours. We are meant to be in communion in all aspects of our life. The father wants to give this kind of life back to his younger son; however, the older son wants no part of it. The father doesn't want to punish. He wants that unity back where the family can feel whole again.

This reminds me of when I was the Pastor in Longview. There is a really nice Hospice facility in Longview. One day I was called there by the family of a man that was dying of cancer. The man was in his late 40s. The man told me that he had been away from the Church for a long time. He hadn't lived his life for God, and he admitted that he hadn't really given God much thought either. He wasn't sure if he wanted to waste my time. After we talked for a little while I convinced him that it was okay to make his confession despite the fact that he hadn't been close to God all these years. He made his

confession. We talked for a little while longer, and then I left. His family wrote a letter to me a couple of weeks later stating that after I had left the room the dying man said that the room suddenly became filled with angels. They were singing and rejoicing that the man had made his confession. The family also wrote that a mother and her young son came to the Hospice facility to visit another patient. As they were passing by the room the young boy exclaimed to his mother "Mom, look at all the angels in this room!" His mother looked but could not see anything. The young boy could see them though.

God does not want to lose anyone, and so the angels were rejoicing and celebrating at the return of one of God's lost sons. That son was dead, but now had come back to life again through the sacrament of confession. He was lost, but has now been found. The Father does not want to condemn. He wants to forgive, and He wants to welcome His children back into the fold. God wants to give life and share His life. He doesn't want to see any of His children die. And so, it is the merciful Father that welcomes sinners back with open arms.

Jesus wants us to imitate the father in the parable. He definitely doesn't want us to be like the older son. Jesus does not want us to have a heart that is so cold and hard that we will only point the accusing finger at others. Jesus wants us to be merciful and forgiving just as our heavenly Father is merciful and forgiving. Rather than condemn those that have sinned and want to return to God we should be overjoyed that they came back. For once they were dead, but have now come back to life. Once they were lost, but now have been found.