

4th Sunday of Lent cycle C

It started as an idea that a few of us were kicking around for some fun on a Saturday night: how about if a bunch of us went bowling? Then the idea started to grow, and it was becoming a huge bowling event: four lanes full of college friends and work chums. Then, hours before the bowling was to happen, something else happened, something was said, the first little trickle of water in a dam that was ready to burst: “I won’t go if ‘so and so’ goes.” Then three others declared that they would *only* go if the one who refused to be in the presence of “so and so” went. And then, another who declared that he would go *if* so and so, the one who’s presence was the catalyst for so many others staying away, would go; and at least a couple of others who would only go *if he* went. Interpersonal disputes led to the anger, which led to the shunning: trying to keep somebody else out of the group and away from the fun, and being willing to shun themselves, deprive themselves out of the fun, if that’s what it came down to.

In the Gospel passage this weekend, Jesus relates a parable about a family with a few issues going on, mostly between the two brothers. The one brother messes up, and he messes up pretty big time, and Jesus purposely uses this exaggerated example to show the extent of God’s mercy and forgiveness. But while the one son messes up and then comes back home, his brother wants to do some shunning: have nothing to do with his brother, who didn’t deserve their father’s mercy, and I think given the audacity of asking for the inheritance, wasting it all and wasting it all very quickly, and then coming back, does pretty much indicate that in this case, total forgiveness would have been asking a bit much. A job as a hired hand, maybe; but forgiveness would be asking for so much that even the audacious, profligate son wouldn’t even ask. So his brother decides to have nothing to do with him: won’t rejoice, won’t even step into the house during the party. He has his reasons, and his reasons don’t seem unreasonable: it’s a matter of justice. Brother messes up, gets a party to celebrate his return. But where was the fatted calf for the son who never messed up, who never left, who always did his father’s will? “Look,” he says to their father, “I never disobeyed one order, and you never gave me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends.” He has a point. But his problem is, while he claims justice as being the motivating factor, he lets his anger and his envy show. Everything that the father has is his; and heck, he can go in and partake of the fatted calf now if he wants, it’s there for everybody. He can enjoy the commotion, the feasting, the festivities and celebration, and he didn’t have to go through the humiliation and the starvation to arrive at the party.

But no deal; and in shunning his brother, he really shuns himself, keeps himself from the good food, and the good times. If it can't be about him, he doesn't want it at all.

All the members of this family are motivated by different reasons. The prodigal son's motivation, frankly, seems to be contrition of the imperfect type: yes, he's sorry for what he's done, but he's not sorry until he hits rock bottom, and doesn't come crawling back until he decides that his fate isn't going to get any better with time. But his imperfect contrition is enough to get him on the road back; it will place him where he needs to be in order to receive his father's mercy. The father, as Jesus says, is moved by compassion. Like many, if not most parents, he probably lost sleep wondering where his son was, how he was, and if he would ever see him again; his compassion will gain him what he wants, namely, it will get him his son back. But the other brother is being driven by his anger and envy, which he clings to so strongly that he won't allow himself to enter the celebration. The house is wide open; the party there for the partaking. But he refuses; he stays outside. He pays the price; he is the one who suffers. And here is one of the challenges of this Lenten lesson: what is it that motivates us during these days of preparation? Some of us may draw close to God with perfect contrition, a sorrow for our sins born of our understanding of the immensity of the offense when we sin against a God who is all good, born of a sadness that comes from realizing that we, too, nailed Jesus to the cross with our sins. Some may be motivated only by imperfect contrition: sorrow because of what my sins do to me, or may do to me, more than how they have offended God. But some may still be driven by our passions: lust that we don't want to say goodbye to, envy that we just can't send away, anger that we prefer to inner peace; gluttony of various sorts that sounds more desirable right now than glory. The celebration is wide open; will we leave behind what we must, what cannot be part of the celebration, in order to enter? That is the Lenten question of questions.

In the first reading from the book of Joshua, we hear of the Israelites as they prepare to say goodbye to the manna. The manna that they had every day, the manna that sustained them on their journey, the manna that frankly, they were growing more than a little bit tired of. As they camped on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover, ate of the produce of the land—finally!—and with that, the manna ceased. It was no longer necessary, because God was about to deliver them to the land overflowing with milk and honey, with all sorts of good, tasty, satisfying things. The lesser was about to pass away, and the greater finally come to pass. In the parable of the prodigal son, the son hopes to go from eating the food of dirty swine and virtually starving to having just

something—anything—to eat; but rather than being delivered from starvation to adequate sustenance, he's delivered to a banquet; and not only a banquet, but a banquet in his honor. We are a pilgrim people; we are the pilgrim Church on earth. This isn't the party, this isn't the celebration, this is not where we hope to end up; even with the abundance we enjoy in our nation, and in our day and age, this is nothing compared to what awaits us; we're on our way to more and far better. On our way, that is, if we decide to go. The Israelites wandered for decades before it came time to set foot on the promised land; the prodigal son made his journey while starving and weak before he finally was fed; but the one who we never hear got to claim his portion of the fattened calf was his brother, who had only to come in from the field and cross the threshold. There stands Our Father, beckoning us in every way imaginable to return and to be part of the banquet he longs to give, be we the wayward child whom he is running to embrace as we return, or the faithful child who never left; it's the same party. All he wants, is for us to choose him and his will, and leave behind lesser things, and enter into the ultimate good.

Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ." We are in the transition now, from a time of want and difficulty and hardship, which we may not even recognize because we haven't seen how great can be the glory; but still we are poised to take possession of the new things which will come, given to us by God. God shuts no one out of his celebration; he shuns no one from heaven. But how many would shun themselves, and say that if the party isn't celebrated my way, I'll just have to hit the highway. The father did not say to his faithful son "I must celebrate and rejoice because your brother has come to life again." He said "we must celebrate." We must accept all those whom God accepts; we must accept all the laws and commandments of God, because these things of God are what will make heaven, heaven. Each time we go to confession, each time we make a worthy communion, we say to our Father that we want to enter in. Lord, tell us what must be left behind, drive from us what must be left behind, so that we, too, can partake of the banquet at which sit both the truly righteous, and the repentant.

Copyright © 2007