

Homily OT 24 – (Year C) – September 15, 2019

EX 32:7-11, 13-14; PS 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19; 1 TM 1:12-17; LK 15:1-32

I don't normally take cues for my spiritual life from **hamburger joints**, but there is **one exception**. Years ago, when I was in my late teens or early 20's, I read the following words on the reader board of **Dusty's Drive-In** in my hometown of Wenatchee, Washington:

“All unhappiness is a result of comparison.”

Whether or not it's completely accurate to blame “**all**” unhappiness on comparison—I'll leave that question to the **philosophy geeks** to wrestle with—the truth **contained in** that statement can **certainly** be applied to the spiritual life, particularly when it deals with **where we focus our attention**.

When we are **resolutely** focused on God, we won't lose our way, even though we will encounter the hardships and difficulties that accompany authentic discipleship. It's when we take our eyes **off of God**, that we get ourselves into trouble! Just consider the “**walking on water**” incident in **Matthew's Gospel**—recalling that it was not only **Jesus** who walked on water, but also **Peter**:

...in the fourth watch of the night [Jesus] came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out for fear. But immediately he spoke to them, saying, “Take heart, it is I; have no fear. And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus; but when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus

immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Mt 14:25-31)

Peter, a mere **human being like you and me**, successfully walked on a raging sea when his focus was on Jesus. The moment he looked elsewhere—in this case, when he looked **with fear** at the **waves**, instead of **with confidence** at **Jesus**—the moment he took his eyes off of Jesus—he began to **drown!**

This particular question of **keeping focused on Jesus** allows us to see more deeply into the **Parable of the Prodigal Son**. But before turning to the parable, let’s recall something that Jesus said to his disciples at the **Last Supper**, as described in John’s Gospel:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father... (Jn 14:6-9)

Whoever has seen **Jesus** has seen the **Father**, because **Jesus reveals the Father**—*particularly the Father’s love and mercy for us*—in his very **person**. When we look at what Jesus **does**...and listen to what Jesus says...we *see* and *hear the Father*. Because **Jesus himself never takes his eyes off of his Father**, he perfectly conveys everything **from** and **about** the Father to us. Earlier in the same gospel, Jesus had said:

Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise. (Jn 5:19)

Now, let's consider why Jesus told the **Parable of the Prodigal Son** in the **first place**. Our Gospel for today's Mass tells us:

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." (Lk 15:1-2)

Whenever we read these verses, it should make us want to say to the Pharisees, "**Of course he welcomes sinners and eats with them**" for the very reason **St. Paul** explained in his **First Letter to Timothy**:

This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. (1 Tim 1:15)

On **another** occasion when the Pharisees complained about the company Jesus kept—this time in the Gospel of Matthew—Jesus responded:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. (Mk 2:17)

We need to keep this in mind whenever Satan tries to convince any of us to stay away from Church because we're **sinners**, or, **more specifically**, because we have fallen into **grave sin**.

Naturally, if we are aware of being in **mortal sin**, we **must not** receive **Holy Communion**, until we have gone to **Confession**. But we must also remember that the **Sunday obligation** is **not** to receive **Holy Communion**. The Sunday obligation is to **attend Mass**—the **entire** Mass from start to finish—**whether or not** we can receive Holy Communion.

Even when we **are** in mortal sin, we nevertheless remain members of the **family of God**—that is, **the Catholic Church**—just like the Prodigal Son remained his father’s son, even though he had squandered his inheritance. The younger son certainly **felt** like an outsider when he realized the **depth** and **consequences** of his **betrayal**, but from his **father’s** perspective, his son was **lost**...but no less **loved**.

That’s why **my fatherly heart** aches when someone tells me that they stayed away from **Confession** and **Mass** for a long time because they felt **ashamed** and **unworthy** to come to Church. I always tell them...

We do *not* come to Church because we’re good. We come to Church because we’re broken. The idea that **sinners** should stay away from the Church is as **irrational** as the idea that **sick people** should stay away from the **hospital**. **None of us is worthy to be here. But it’s not about our worthiness, anyway. It’s about the Father’s mercy.**

It’s **our misery**, in fact, that attracts the **Father’s mercy**. And the **Father’s mercy** likewise attracts **sinners** who have **strayed** from God, **tried the ways of the world**, and come up **empty**—which, by the way, is the **only possible outcome**.

That’s why today’s Gospel says that **“tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus”**. Think of Jesus as the Father’s **“sinner magnet”** and you have the right perspective.

Now turning to the parable—the **two brothers have much more in common** that we might notice at first glance, even though they chose very different paths. **Both were blind to the father’s love** because both focused on something **other than** their father’s love.

The younger son compared **life at home** to the **glitz and glamour of the world** and found his **family life wanting**. He thought only of his own selfish desires...and wanted out! He got his wish...and then got far more than he bargained for!

The **older son** treated his **relationship with his father** like so many **Catholics** treat their **relationship with Jesus** today—as one of **obligation** and **rule-keeping** rather than as a **relationship of love**. You can just hear the **entitlement attitude** in the older brother's words:

He said to his father ... “Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends.” (Lk 15:29)

The older brother **compared** his **self-defined perfection** with the **wretched behavior** of his younger brother and the **resentment fueled by this comparison** blinded him to his father's constant love both for him **and** for his younger sibling.

Such an **entitlement attitude** can even infect **our** relationship with God.

This is most obvious, for example, is Catholics who are indifferent **about missing Sunday Mass**.

I often ask such people who admit missing Mass regularly, if they would be **satisfied** if their spouse were **faithful to them 95% of the time**. Those who have **good math and logic skills** understand that I'm **really** asking them if they would be ok with their spouse **cheating** on them... **5% of the time**.

Naturally, they say, **“No way! I expect 100% fidelity”**.

Shifting focus, I then ask them, “**If there are, on average, four Sundays per month, how many *Sunday Masses per month* do you typically miss?**”

Let’s say they have a habit of missing **two Masses** per month. I’ll point out that **their level of fidelity to Jesus is 50%!** And yet they expect—as they should—**100% fidelity from their spouse.**

I then ask them, “**Why isn’t *Jesus* worthy 100% fidelity?**”

This helps shift the focus from **obligation** to **relationship**—from keeping **rules** to showing **gratitude**. *Jesus asks so little—and he gets even less from so many of us*—because we seldom look beyond our own desires and, in the process, **overlook** the Father’s merciful love as, revealed by Jesus.

Jesus hints at *what made him so attractive to tax collectors and sinners* at the point in the parable where the younger son hits **rock bottom** and re-evaluates what he left behind when he **rejected his father** and went on his **pleasure rampage.**

Coming to his senses he thought, “How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger.” (Lk 15:17)

That’s how this verse reads in our **Lectionary translation.** In another translation, that same verse reads as follows:

But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger!” (Lk 15:17)

The son— *came to himself*— he realized **who *he* was** and **who his *father* was**—and began—though initially driven only by physical hunger—to appreciate what he had left behind. So, he headed home, **expecting the worst**, only to receive an **unexpectedly joyful welcome** from his **ridiculously merciful father**.

Jesus said: *...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.* (Lk 15:7)

Likewise, there will be more joy *in* a **prodigal son's** or **daughter's heart**—after experiencing the Father's undeserved love and mercy through Jesus Christ—than there will be in **the heart of a self-righteous person** who believes that the love of God is **owed** them because they **kept the rules** and never sinned **outrageously**.

It is far better to *submit our sinful, broken souls* to the **ridiculous mercy of our Heavenly Father** than to **fool ourselves** into believing that we don't even **need** it.

Because, as Jesus pointed out to another **Pharisee**—this time in the **Gospel of Luke**—when speaking to him of the woman who **washed his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair**:

...I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little. (Lk 7:47)

We all have much to be forgiven. But we also all have a Father in Heaven who has **much more mercy than we have sin**. And the love and gratitude we show him is directly proportional to the amount of his mercy that we allow to *penetrate our prodigal hearts*.