Lent IV  
Cycle C, 3.31.19  
Joshua 5:9, 10-12/2 Corinthians 5:17-21/ Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

FINDING OUR WAY BACK HOME

One of the most famous artistic depictions of today’s gospel is Rembrandt’s painting of the Return of the Prodigal Son. It’s a beautiful way to bring the story to life for us. Look at the father, his back stooped by the years and his hands stiffened by old age. His eyes are closed, but an almost overwhelming sense of kindness is apparent. Here is a man who shows mercy and love and compassion to a son who acted as though he had wished his father dead. Asking for an early inheritance is equivalent to just that!

We see only the back of the prodigal son who left home with money; now he returns home in tatters. One sandal lies beside his foot, while the other barely hangs on by a strap. His head is shaved like that of a slave, and he looks to the side. His gaze isn’t up into the father’s eyes. I wonder why. Some writers suggest that the son is not returning in a spirit of repentance, but is scheming to return home so he won’t starve. "... I am dying here with hunger. I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight..." Perhaps, the prodigal’s plan is to manipulate the father, so the son turns his gaze away from his father. I think we can assume that the son truly has repented. If not, it would be inconsistent within the context of Luke’s gospel. The story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son are a trilogy whose theme is repentance: "...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents." The son averts his gaze in sorrow, shame, remorse, and perhaps anxiety over his father’s response.

Looking at the other figures in the painting makes us wonder who they are. In the background you can clearly see two people—a woman, standing, and a man with a broad black hat who is sitting. Hidden in the shadows are two other figures. One of them, the one most hidden in the shadows, must certainly be the older brother who is resentful toward the younger and angry at his father’s eager and generous welcome for the unfaithful sibling. And the other figures in the painting? What is going through their minds? Do they share in the deep emotions of the father with his son? At first glance, one would think so. The homecoming of a wayward son should be a time of great rejoicing. Or perhaps, does the taller old man’s impassive expression hide his feelings of disgust toward the prodigal and perhaps toward the father who may be overly eager to welcome his wayward son? It remains to be seen just how much happiness these people share with the father.

Rembrandt’s painting, which elevates tragedy to a symbol of universal significance, offers us a compelling way to enter this familiar and well-loved parable. Preachers will often ask us which character in a bible story we identify with. It gives us
a way to enter the story personally. There is another way of approaching this and all gospel stories, including the Passion story which we will hear in two weeks. What if we saw in this parable a part of us in each of the characters? There is something of the prodigal son or daughter in each of us. We have all strayed from God’s embrace, arrogantly and foolishly forging our own path with no concern for the consequences and no guidance from divine wisdom. We fail to appreciate the blessings right before our eyes. Isn’t that part of us which is judgmental toward others and unwilling to give someone a break, like the attitude of the older brother? When we’re faithful and consistent, those who are lax or irresponsible grate against us. The last thing we want to see is for them to experience joy and forgiveness after what they’ve done.

And isn’t there also a spirit of compassion within us, like that of the father in the gospel, who hates to see anyone excluded and is willing to do anything to make the family happy and bring about harmony and unity? We can see something of ourselves in all the characters. I believe this and all the gospel stories unfold in each of our lives. That’s why they have the power to transform us in their hearing.

There are contradictions within us, like the older and younger brothers, that can cause us a lot of frustration. It’s hard to admit that we’re complex creatures – capable of divine aspirations at times; stooping to the lowest level of desires or actions at other times. The gracious father and understanding mother within us help us to have great patience with our sense of inner contradiction. We’re invited to befriend those contradictions, otherwise we’ll never find our way to inner peace. The poet Rilke said that “difficulty is one of the greatest friends of the soul.” Just as we are welcoming to what brings us joy and pleasure, we ought to bring that same hospitality in meeting the negative parts of us. There is energy in that darker part of our hearts.

The light which illuminates Rembrandt’s painting wouldn’t be artistically effective if it didn’t have the contrast of the shadows and the darkness. The strange paradox in our soul is that if we try to ignore or remove the awkward quality, it will pursue us. The only way to quiet the unease is to transfigure it, to let it become something creative and positive that contributes to who you are.

We are called to be a loving parent to those delinquent qualities in our lives. Our kindness to ourselves, like the father’s embrace of the prodigal, will alleviate their fear and help those negative parts of ourselves to see that our soul is a home where they can be embraced and transformed. Renewal, repentance,
reconciliation – however you call it – is a journey whose end has not been reached. We are always a ‘work in progress.’

Rembrandt’s painting illustrates another truth in life that most of you live by each day – the remarkable love of parents for their children. You boys and girls often have no idea how much your parents do and would do for you. And many good parents don’t realize what your love for your sons and daughters enables you to do. In Luke’s gospel Jesus holds up the boy’s father as a model of compassion and reconciliation. Note that when he catches sight of his son in the distance, the father runs to greet and embrace him before the prodigal can even open his mouth to begin his carefully-rehearsed speech. The father welcomes his son home with no recriminations, no conditions, no rancor. The father has never lost hope in his son’s return: his love has survived the hurt and anguish of his son’s leaving. A parent’s love is the very reflection of God’s love for each of us – love that always welcomes back, love that reconciles and heals, love that perseveres through every hurt and heartache, through every long day and night of waiting.

And lest the gospel seem to ignore the prodigal daughter and the forgiving mother, be sure to look at artist Charlie Mackesy’s painting of the “Prodigal Daughter” in the vestibule as you leave church today. His painting universalizes the love of God – there are prodigal daughters as well as prodigal sons and a mother’s love is as deep as a father’s and goes to perhaps even greater lengths to welcome the child home. There’s a gospel message today for each of us and for all of us.

John Kasper, osfs