

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 31, 2019
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
116 Theodore St.
Scranton, PA 18508
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

On February 21, 1973, there was an earthquake that shook Los Angeles County, California, centered at Point Mugu on the South Coast. My great-grandmother was a 96-year-old resident of a nursing home that was damaged badly by the 5.7 magnitude quake. Despite her age she was still ambulatory, so as the nurses and aides got people to safety, she volunteered to help evacuate the building, pushing wheelchair-bound patients out to the parking lot. The media got wind that an almost-centenarian had for a day become a rescue worker, so they made their way out to interview Esther Mary Horst. I had the privilege of reading one of those articles about my great-grandmother, and I was stunned by what she talked about. The reporter naturally wanted to know how a 96-year-old widow was able to participate in a rescue operation, but my great-grandmother steered the conversation in another direction. She spoke of my great-uncle John, her eight-month-old son she had lost in 1908, sixty-five years before, as if it were yesterday.

My great-grandmother's loss taught me, even before I had children of my own, about the intense love parents have for each of their children. She thought of her son constantly, so much so that my grandmother talked to me about the older brother she had never met. I, in turn, have told my children about their Uncle John, a boy who died a century before most of them were born. It isn't hard to imagine how overcome with joy my great-grandmother would have been had she been able to embrace her son once more, to kiss his face and receive his kisses.

That's the closest I can come to describing the love of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. How many parents have lost children, never to see them again on this side of eternity? Yet here is a father who gets his son back, a son he thought he had lost forever; so he does what my father in such circumstances would do. He runs to him, embraces him, kisses him, overjoyed that he who was dead is alive again, he who was lost is found. He doesn't scold him, or even ask him where he has been or what he has done. He just shows his son he loves him and doesn't let him finish his speech. Before the Prodigal Son can ask to be treated like a hired servant, the father has already begun making arrangements for the celebration. To witness such love is for parents an occasion for us to count our blessings, how grateful we are for the children we have.

And just as we begin to bask in the glow of such unconditional love, we are accosted by the prodigal son's brother. Sulking and self-absorbed, it is plain that the Prodigal Son was already dead to him, and it seems he wishes his brother had stayed dead. The father's abiding and abounding love is alien to him, and his first impulse is not to embrace the brother he had lost but to throw in his face his imprudence and unchastity. Here is the scold everyone wants to avoid,

the self-righteous and petulant bore who always sees the glass half-empty and never remembers to give thanks for all he has received from God's hand. The brother's lack of charity contrasts sharply with the father's love, and we wonder how siblings can be so cruel.

After I was reconciled to Holy Mother Church, I wondered the same thing. At two different convocations two of my brother priests tried to publicly humiliate me. The details are unimportant. Suffice it to say that the lack of charity on the part of my brothers issued in two different conversations with the Bishop of Scranton. How much more than grateful was I then to have a father in Msgr. Bill Feldcamp. Our first pastor kept the wolves at bay, ceaselessly insisting that the model the Church was to follow was the love of the father, not the jealousy and envy of the son. Without his advocacy, our community would have folded, and I would never have been ordained, since more than a few priests saw us as rivals, rather than the helpless, wayward, and broken sons that we were. In an hour of need, we required the father's love, not the brother's scorn. Msgr. Feldcamp was the father we needed, unafraid to rebuke those who would have left us shivering outside the gates, unworthy as we were of the charity we requested. He made sure the brother did not have the last say about the fate of the Prodigal Son. Whatever good we do here we owe first to God and then to Msgr. Feldcamp, whose fatherly solicitude silenced our detractors.

If the past twelve years is any guide, we ought to expect a lot more broken people to come through our doors, prodigal sons who need the Father's love. We must resist the temptation to play the role of the brother, eager as we are to shield our many children from the destructive forces that have laid waste our society and nation. It's too easy to want all the best Catholics here in one place, since the job we've been given is much harder. We are to show to the wayward and the lost the love Esther Mary Horst, my great-grandmother, had for her son, the love Msgr. Feldcamp had for each and every one of our founding members. Our parish must never become a club of saints but should always be a hospital for sinners, with new patients ever welcome, beneficiaries of the same intense love we received when, fifteen years ago, we knocked on the doors of St. Clare Church. We misfits were embraced by a father who would have died for us, indeed, who still would. The only way to honor that legacy of love is to imitate this Divine generosity as best we can. May every prodigal son we receive know we've been waiting with bated breath for his return home. May he be to us the child we thought we had lost but have joyfully come to know is alive again.