



Homily for 3/31/2019

Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year C

Rev. J. David Carter, JCL

The Merciful Father

The parable of the prodigal son is misnamed. Like most things, we tend to make it about ourselves. We can identify with one or the other of the sons and if we are honest, it is more likely that we identify with the so called prodigal one. Therefore we commonly refer to this parable as the parable of the prodigal son. But the story is not so much about the errant son, nor about the faithful one. The story's core is the merciful father. That is what this parable should be called, "The parable of the merciful father."

If we were to sit back and take in the story that Jesus tells, in the context in which he tells it, we get a very clear picture. The point we are to take is that God is revealed to us as the Faithful and Merciful Father who longs for the return of his son even though he is unfaithful and rapacious. This is a radical message of merciful love. And it was told by Jesus with the express purpose of disrupting sensibilities. He was responding to the ridicule of the scribes and Pharisees who marveled at Jesus' own time spent with the miscreants of his day - the tax-collector and sinners. Note how our God reveals his own heart of love for **both** the faithful and the wayward son, even if the faithful son becomes indignant. God loves all of his children. However, the father does not pull any punches; the life of dissipation, which the prodigal son had led, was not good in any way. The father is not under any delusion about the nature of his son's transgression. If the son were just coming home from a pre-arranged trip that the father had approved of, he wouldn't have celebrated so much. The father's reaction is a recognition of the great evil that had been the son's life choices. Because of those evil actions, he was lost; he was dead. The father could only rejoice as much as he did, because it could have ended very differently had there not been this metanoia, this repentance, this conversion and rethinking of his life. There is no celebration of vice here, only the rejoicing of repentance.

Now all of this begs the question: how do we then respond to saints and sinners in our midst? For the saint in all of us, we must be careful to guard against spiritual pride. Looking down one's nose at sinners with a sense of moral superiority is definitely **not** the mind of the Lord our God, who makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike and whose blood was spilled upon the tree of the cross for those very souls the Pharisee in us would condemn.

As for the sinner, let's not confuse anything. Jesus loves the sinner but hates the sin. If the prodigal son has come back home with a bunch of swine and prostitutes demanding the father to condone his evil actions, we would have had a very different parable. The modern mind is too ready to conflate the father's joy for the prodigal's return with an acceptance of where the son had been. We have lost a proper distinction between the love of the sinner and the hatred of his sin. We have falsely conflated mercy with accommodation of evil. To understand the mind of the faithful and merciful father, I think a long quote from Archbishop Fulton Sheen will do well. In his book, *Way to Happiness*, he says:

"As the world grows soft, it uses more and more the word mercy. This could be a praiseworthy characteristic if mercy were understood right. But too often by mercy is meant letting anyone who breaks the natural or the Divine law, or who betrays his country 'off the hook.' Such mercy is an emotion, not a virtue. Forgotten in all such mercy pleas is the principle that mercy is the perfection of justice. Mercy does not come first, and then justice; but rather justice first, then mercy. The divorce of mercy and justice is sentimentality, as the divorce of justice from mercy is severity. Mercy is not love when it is divorced from justice.



“There are some crimes the tolerance of which is equivalent to consent to their wrong. Those who ask for the release of murderers, traitors, and the like, on the grounds that we must be ‘merciful, as Jesus was merciful,’ forget that that same Merciful Savior also said that He came not to bring peace, but the sword.

“As a mother proves that she loves her child by hating the physical disease which would ravage the child’s body, so Our Lord proves he loved Goodness by hating evil, which would ravage the souls of his creatures. For a doctor to be merciful to a typhoid germ or polio in a patient, or for a judge to be tolerant of rape, would be as for Our Lord to be indifferent to sin. Love can be stern, forceful, or even fierce, as was the love of the Savior. It makes a scourge of ropes and drives buyers and sellers out of temples; it refuses to give the courtesy of speech to moral triflers like Herod, for it would only add to his moral guilt; it turns on a Roman Procurator, boasting of Totalitarian law, and reminds him that he would have no power unless it were given him by God. When a gentle hint to a woman at the well did no good, He went to the point ruthlessly and reminded her that she had five divorces.

“When so-called righteous men would put Him out of the way, He tore the mask off their hypocrisy and called them a ‘brood of vipers.’ When He heard of the shedding of the blood of the Galileans, it was with formidable harshness that He said: ‘You will all perish as they did, if you do not repent.’

“If mercy meant the forgiveness of all faults without retribution and without justice, it would end in a multiplication of wrongs. Mercy is for those who will not abuse it, and no man will abuse it who already started to make the wrong right, as justice demands [as the prodigal son who humbles himself to return to the faithful father]. What some today call mercy is not mercy at all, but a feather-bed for those who fall from justice; and thus they multiply guilt and evil by supplying such mattresses. To become the object of mercy is not the same as to go scot-free, for as the word of God says: ‘Whom the Lord loves, he chastises.’”

(from *Way to Happiness*, Fulton J. Sheen, Garden City Books, 1949)

Let us learn the lesson of the Parable of the Faithful and Merciful Father as Jesus meant it. God does not desire the death of the sinner, so do not begrudge those who have made attempts at repentance and who, with humility, stumble towards the father’s house. God desires not the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live! There is hope for sinners yet! But let’s not abuse the story either, by a false sense of mercy. Sin kills and loses the soul. God is faithful to all who would turn to Him with humility.

May Jesus Christ be praised!