

The Parable of the Prodigal Son



Luke 15 has been called by Biblical scholars 'The chapter of lost things'. In it we find a lost sheep, a lost coin and, most famously, a lost son – the Prodigal Son. This story, maybe next to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, is arguably the most famous and, likely, the most beloved parable told by Jesus. All of these lost things are found in the end. Thus, they are parables of hope – hope for the sinner and all those who feel lost and forsaken. This will be the first part in a series of reflections on this great parable – said by Charles Dickens to be 'The finest short story ever written'. My hope is to connect these reflections to the Year of the Saints which we are coming to end of here in the Diocese of Burlington.

Saint Augustine wrote: "There is no saint without a past, no sinner without a future." The Prodigal Son story is a story about the sinner who becomes a saint, the lost who was found and the dead man who came to life again. Recently the famous Catholic writer Matthew Kelly wrote a book entitled The Biggest Lie in the History of Christianity. The 'biggest lie' according to Kelly is that we have come to believe that holiness is impossible. We are stuck in the proverbial mud with the prodigal son and are unable to see the heights of holiness and glory where God can bring us. Every morning I try to pray a prayer inspired by Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati that contains the following lines:

Heavenly Father ,
Give me the courage to strive for the highest goals,
to flee every temptation to be mediocre.
Enable me to aspire to greatness, as Pier Giorgio did,
and to open my heart with joy to Your call to holiness.
Free me from the fear of failure.
I want to be, Lord, firmly and forever united to You.

The story of the prodigal son, indeed the story of every human being, is that due to original sin we sometimes see our Father in Heaven as an impediment at best, and an enemy at worst, to our human and spiritual growth. Due to sin, we see God as an obstacle, rather than a ladder; due to the scourge of sin we see God as a policeman rather than the loving, nurturing Father that He is; and due to sin we, too, flee with the prodigal son to 'distant lands' looking for other ways, avenues and solutions to our human needs and desires. Our sinful nature points us to 'mediocrity' and not 'the highest goals', but instead to the base things of this world. God instead has a high plan – indeed, the highest plan for our lives. I pray that these reflections redound to God's glory and draw all of us to a greater love of not just our Father in Heaven, but the vocation to which He calls each of us by name.

Though the story of the Prodigal Son begins in Luke 15:11, it is important to understand the full context of why Jesus told it. We hear in Luke 15: 1-2, “The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Thus, Jesus addresses the parable to both groups, and each will have something to learn from his words.

One set of listeners were the notorious ‘tax collectors’ -- hated among the Jewish people for their tendency toward extortion, bribery and greed. Worst of all, they were viewed as traitors to their own people as they were Jews who worked for the Romans in defiance of their own customs and norms. The other group, the Pharisees, were religious and devout Jews who had emerged after the Maccabean revolt in the 2nd century B.C. Their primary role was the preservation of the law (or ‘Torah’) and the proper sacrifice within the Temple. The word ‘Pharisee’ comes from the Hebrew word *parush*, which means “one who is separated.” Thus, the Pharisees had a prime focus upon ritual purity, separation of oneself from ‘sinners’ and those who were not Jews (Gentiles). Sinners (e.g. tax collectors) were not to be touched or interacted with for fear of ritual contamination.

Jesus begins his parable with ‘two sons’ – these sons in many ways represent his listeners. The ‘younger son’ is a representation of the tax collectors and the ‘older son’ (who appears at the end of the story) is a symbol of the Pharisees and religious leaders. Yet, as we shall see, these two sons represent each of us as well. These sons have one ‘Father’ -- a symbol of our common Father in Heaven. Here are the first few verses of the parable:

Then Jesus said, “A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his Father, ‘Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the Father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation.

The younger son will commit three major flaws at the outset of the story. The first is that the son *demand*s his share of the estate that is to come to him. Second, the son treats his Father as though his Father were dead (since, of course, an inheritance is normally given after a person dies). Third, a point that is a little less obvious, is that the younger son in Jewish culture typically did not get a share in the inheritance. Thus, within two short verses the younger son is painted as a selfish sinner. Moreover, a few words often overlooked are ‘after a few days’ – in other words, the son takes the Father’s inheritance and then lords it over him for a few days before leaving home. One might see this as the ‘fourth’ sin committed by the younger son.

The ‘inheritance’ symbolizes the gifts God gives us. Here, the prodigal son, takes his inheritance and uses it on a life of ‘dissipation’. The word ‘prodigal’ is a word that comes from the Latin root meaning ‘to consume wastefully’. Though the word does not appear in the parable, centuries ago it became the shorthand word to describe this younger son. The younger son seeks meaning away from his Father. In the words of St. Augustine, his request to have his share of the estate ‘epitomizes the depraved inclination in the human person to withdraw from God’ – done primarily as a consequence of original sin.’

Thus, the younger son will take his belongings and set off to a 'distant land'. The distant land symbolizes the futile human quest to find meaning apart from God. Psalm 139 recounts how, ultimately, it is impossible to run away from God:

Where can I go from your spirit?
From your presence, where can I flee?
If I ascend to the heavens, you are there;
if I lie down in Sheol (hell), there you are.
If I take the wings of dawn
and dwell beyond the sea,
Even there your hand guides me,
your right hand holds me fast.
If I say, "Surely darkness shall hide me,
and night shall be my light"
Darkness is not dark for you,
and night shines as the day.
Darkness and light are but one.

Thus, even though the younger son thinks he is away from the Father, a key teaching of the Christian faith is that God is everywhere (or omnipresent). God is with the son in the beginning, but he is also with him when he is wasting his inheritance and, most importantly, with him when he finds himself hitting rock bottom in the mud and mire (a point that we will return to later).

There are many saints in Church history who were horrible sinners before becoming great saints. The list is long, but some interesting ones to note are the following:

Saint Moses the Black – a notorious brigand from Egypt who led a band of thieves killing and stealing before he converted to Catholicism and lived the life of monk the rest of his life. St. Moses became known for his holiness and great wisdom.

Blessed Charles Foucauld – an aristocratic Frenchman who lived a life of worldly pleasure and believed himself to be an agnostic for a number of years before converting back to Catholicism and becoming a monk in the desert of Algeria.

Saint Augustine – possibly the most famous sinner who became a great saint. The story of his conversion is found in his book Confessions – said by some to be the greatest autobiography ever written. Saint Augustine writes, "Herein lay my sin, that it was not in God, but in his creatures—myself and the rest—that I sought for pleasures, honors, and truths. And I fell thereby into sorrows, troubles, and errors."

Blessed Bartolo Longo – Blessed Longo was a Satanic priest in 19th century Italy before converting to the Catholic faith and eventually becoming a Third Order Dominican and a great proponent of the rosary.

In this Year of the Saints we need to keep ever before us these saints who were once great sinners. Indeed, lest we forget, the two great pillars of the Church – Saints Peter and Paul – are examples of this. St. Peter denied Christ three times, and St. Paul was a 'blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man'

(1 Tim. 1:13). These two great saints remind us that God can write straight with our crooked lines and use 'earthen vessels' (2 Cor. 4: 7) for His glory.

Let us now return to the Prodigal Son. At this point in the story, the son is falling, but he has not yet hit rock bottom. A key word at this point occurs in verse 14: "When he had **freely** spent everything..." The son thinks he is 'free' – he is free to do what **he** wants. Indeed, this is what the world offers us as the model of freedom – namely, to be 'free' means I get to follow my own personal whims and fancies. Another parable also from the Gospel of Luke comes to mind here -- the parable of the Rich Fool from Luke 12. In this parable there is a man who is also free to do whatever **he** wants. Luke 12 has the Rich Fool saying:

'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"

The Rich Fool, like the Prodigal son, fails to see that the gifts (or inheritance) given by God are *for God* and not for himself. Instead, notice how he talks: "**my** crops", "what **I** will do", "**I** will tear", "**my** barns", "**my** grain", etc. Indeed, the sinner sees life as something to be taken, used and exploited for selfish gain (one might argue this is one of the greatest temptations of our modern techno-industrial world). St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians regarding sinners: "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame." Contrarily, St. James says in his Epistle: "Every good and perfect gift is *from above*, coming down from the Father of Lights..." (James 1: 17). Thus, the saint sees life as a gift to be given back to God as an offering and even a form of worship. St. Ignatius will summarize this in his famous dictum: *Ad majorem Dei gloriam* (All for the glory of God!).

The prodigal son thinks he is free; but he does not yet understand what true freedom is. True freedom, ironically and paradoxically, is found only in following the will of another – namely, God. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says it this way: "The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to "the slavery of sin" (CCC #1733). Love is only possible in freedom. The Father longs for the free assent of the son's love, but he respects and allows his false 'freedom' to lead him down another road.

Following the will of God, no matter where it leads, is where all the saints found meaning, purpose and ultimately holiness. Holiness is possible – but only by following the will of God for your life. Every saint's story is different because every saint had a unique calling for their own life and for their own time. St. Katherine Drexel became a great saint because she recognized a specific need in the 19th century and responded to that need – namely, serving poor black and Native Americans. St. Damian of Molokai saw a specific need on the island of Molokai and responded to the call that God gave him to server the poor lepers of Hawaii. Mother Teresa famously heard a 'call within a call' to serve the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. St. John Paul II listened throughout his life to God's call and how God wanted him to respond to thousands of different challenges and opportunities put before him and the Church (in Poland and in the world). Though crosses, sufferings and challenges come to all saints, ultimately peace comes because they know in the end they are doing what God has asked them to do with their lives. This is the Holy Spirit operating and alive in the soul – Christ that now lives within the saint. In the words of St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Living this way as a

saint is to live in freedom and to live in true freedom is to live as St. Paul says in the 'glorious freedom of the children of God' (Romans 8:21).

Let us return to the Prodigal Son. The son has strayed from his Father and now the consequences of leaving the safety of his Father's voice and word comes crashing in. The story continues, "When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that land and he found himself in dire need." The younger son is like the fool who built his 'house on sand', as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7). The winds and rain and the 'famine' come -- which they invariably do when we stray from God -- and the son loses every material possession. Yet, despite this, he still has his life, his mind, his soul and his will; but, most importantly, he still has his Father's love.

The parable continues, "So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine." For years I overlooked a key word in this sentence: namely, 'so'. The son has strayed and will continue to stray from the Father, but at this point in the story *he could have gone back* to the Father. Instead, in his weakness and sin he strays even further away. A common thread among so many saints is suffering and hardship. A favorite saint among youth ministers is St. John Bosco. St. John Bosco encountered incredible difficulties and obstacles throughout his life -- both from those outside the Church, but also members of the Church who opposed his methods. In fact, in one episode he barely escaped from someone who tried to forcibly take him to an insane asylum for the rest of his life (Bosco escaped by jumping out of the carriage they tried to lock him in). St. Thomas Aquinas was opposed by his own family in his desire to enter the Dominicans -- famously locking him in a tower and sending in a prostitute to lure him away. St. Thomas took a burning log out of the fire and chased the woman out of his room, thus preserving his purity the rest of his life. St. Josephine Bakhita of the Sudan was a slave who was viciously beaten by her first owners. She could have chosen hatred and vitriol the rest of her life, but instead chose the way of love and peace. The list goes on.

What the saints teach us is how to overcome obstacles and challenges. In the short parable of the two foundations mentioned earlier (the wise builder who built his house on rock and the fool who built his house on sand), an often overlooked element of that parable is that *wind and rain (suffering) will come*. Jesus does not say, *if the wind and rain come*. No, the rain and wind *will* come -- suffering and challenges will come to every Christian in this life. The saints recall Jesus' words from the Gospel of John, "In this world *you will have troubles*, but take heart for I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Again, the prodigal son chooses not to return to the Father but enters into the mud and mire. Luke 15: 16 says, "And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any." What is Jesus saying here? The younger son has become unclean -- the world sees him as lost, forgotten, evil, etc. He is in the pigpen with the pigs. In fact, he is lower than the pigs -- animals that were 'unclean' and not to be touched or eaten according to Jewish law and custom. Indeed, the owners of the pigs when confronted with whether to give food to the pigs or the prodigal son, choose the pigs. In other words, in their eyes the pigs are of more value than the son. Later in the parable it will say, 'Then he got up' (Luke 15:20) -- in other words, he was sitting in the mud.

"I waited patiently for the Lord and he inclined and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit, out of the mire..." Psalm 40

I have heard innumerable talks, sermons and presentations over the years, but one story from many years ago stands out. I was at a 'Mount 2000' weekend retreat at Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, Maryland around the year 2000. There were roughly 1500 youth present for a weekend of

prayer, music, talks and the Sacraments. A Franciscan friar gave a talk on Saturday where he told the story of his conversion. He recalled how he was a heroin addict on the streets of New York, living a life of crime. One fateful night he was arrested and thrown into the back of a police car. He said he cried out to God to help him and that God reached into the car and immediately healed him. He said he never touched drugs again and completely turned his life around. When I have told this story over the years, the question I ask young people is: “Was God in the back of that police car?” The answer is, of course, yes. God is present in our tabernacles, our Sacraments, our churches, retreat centers and other holy places. But God is also everywhere. God is in the mud and mire with us when we find ourselves there – even if we have willingly and willfully placed ourselves there.

The greatest symbol of this presence is the crucifix. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, united himself with us through the incarnation – but most powerfully he united with our suffering, loss and even sense of abandonment when he embraced the cross. *“Where can I run from your Spirit? . . . If I make my bed in the depths you are there...”* (Psalm 139: 7-8). Though the Son will ‘come to his senses’ and return to the Father, it is vitally important to understand that in many ways his Father was always with him. Like a rubber band stretched to its full limit, his Father was still connected to him (c.f. 1 Peter 4:6) as he sat in the mud and the mire. St. John of the Cross, the saint best known for his reflections on the dark night of soul, wrote, “In the dark night of the soul, bright flows the river of God.” God’s light reaches across the abyss to the prodigal son and begins to illumine his mind once again. With everything stripped away, lying down on the ground, he has nowhere else to look but up.

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

The prodigal son is in darkness and looks up and ‘comes to his senses’. Before he acts with his body (moving out of the mud), he will use his mind. Saints have always emphasized the importance of the mind and the thoughts. Our actions follow our thoughts – though not always of course. St. Paul will say in his letter to the Philippians: “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—**think** about such things” (Phil 4:8). In other words, dwell on the good so you will do the good. The prodigal son remembers the good place which was his Father’s house. He recalls the abundance, the goodness and the love that was present there. Luke 15: 17-19 says, “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. I shall get up and go to my Father and I shall say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.’”

The son is not one of the ‘hired workers’, but the son of the Father. Recall that all the baptized are sons and daughters of God. We are not ‘hired workers’, but instead His children. Jesus will echo this in a couple of his healings: *“Daughter, your faith has healed you!”* (Matt. 9:22), *“Son, your sins are forgiven...”* (Mark 2:5). The prodigal son recalls that he has sinned against his Father, not just against the Ten Commandments. When we go to confession we do not say, “Bless me Ten Commandments for I have sinned.” Instead, we say, “Bless me **Father** for I have sinned.” Sin is a willful disobedience of our Father in Heaven who loves us. The prodigal son recognizes that he has wasted the gifts his Father has given him and wants to beg his forgiveness.

The story in many ways now shifts. The prodigal son now becomes a model for us. He is humbled by his sin and does not think to himself, “I will go back to my Father and he will let me in because that is what a Father does.” Instead, he recognizes that ‘he no longer deserves to be called a son’. He is now a model for humility and contrition. Here, again, is another pivotal point in the story.

Thought *can* lead to action; but does not necessarily do so. I can think about working out at the gym, but that is not actually working out at the gym. Jesus says in Matthew 15: 19: “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.” Contrarily, out of the heart can come good intentions, holy thoughts, merciful understand, etc. A wise friend once told me, “There is nothing we do that is not first done in the imagination.” The prodigal son has a good impulse *and follows it*.

The Greek root for the word ‘repent’ is *metanoia*. Metanoia means to turn around and face and walk in a different direction. The son is facing sin, but now repents and turns in a new direction. He turns back toward his Father and walks anew -- walking in the ‘way of love’ (Eph. 5:2). The story continues: “So he got up and went back to his Father.” The story does not indicate how far he had gone; but suggests he had not gone very far toward his Father when his Father ‘caught sight of him’. It says, “While he was still a long way off, his Father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.’” Some Biblical scholars suggest that this is a parallel to the story of lost sheep where the shepherd goes and finds the lost sheep and literally puts the sheep on his back and carries him home (Luke 15:4-5). Though the Father does represent our Father in heaven, it is worth reflecting how the action of the Father ‘leaving the house’ and coming out to meet the son may be analogous to Christ leaving heaven and becoming man. St. Paul says in Philippians 2: “[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” The Father does not wait for the son to come knocking at the door, but leaves to go and find him. The Father runs to the son – indeed, the only place in the Scriptures where God is depicted as ‘running’ is when he is running toward the sinner!

“And the grace of our Lord overflowed to me, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. This is a trustworthy saying, worthy of full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. But for this very reason I was shown mercy, so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His perfect patience as an example to those who would believe in Him for eternal life.” 1 Timothy 1: 14-16

What is *not* said in the Parable of the Prodigal Son is in many ways as important as what *is* said. After returning to his Father and begging for his forgiveness, the Father shows only his mercy and love. The Father makes no mention of his sin as the son’s actions reflect his true and perfect contrition. The Father demonstrates the ‘joy in heaven over one sinner who repents’ that Jesus mentions at the end of the parable of the lost sheep earlier in Luke 15 -- “I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.” Elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus will tell the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14) – one who sees himself as righteous and holy before God (the Pharisee) and one who stands at a distance and says the famous ‘Jesus Prayer’ -- “Have mercy on me a poor sinner!” (the tax collector). The one who was ‘right’ before God was the tax collector because of his humility.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son continues:

“But his father ordered his servants, ‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast,

because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ Then the celebration began.”

Sin can seem overwhelming and a tremendous weight. St. James says in his epistle: “Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:15). St. Paul will say in Romans: “Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” (Rom. 7:24). Yet the message of our faith is that God is stronger than death and grace always far outweighs sin. The Exsultet prayer from the Easter vigil contains these lines: “This is the night that even now, throughout the world, sets Christian believers apart from worldly vices and from the gloom of sin, leading them to grace and joining them to his holy ones.” It continues with the famous line: “O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!” The weight of sin is terrible, but the gift of God is immeasurably greater and not commensurate with sin. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.” In other words, God will pour out his amazing grace to those who seek him with a pure and sincere heart (c.f. Matt. 5:8).

The Father approaches the son and showers him with mercy and forgiveness – seven things in total. He embraces him (1), kisses him (2), puts the finest robe on him (3), puts a ring on finger (4), sandals on his feet (5), they slaughter the fattened calf (6) and celebrate with a feast (7). Seven as a symbol of perfection is here the representation of the super-abundance of God’s mercy and redemption poured out upon the son. Saint Faustina, the great saint of God’s mercy, put it this way: “All grace flows from mercy, and the last hour abounds with mercy for us. Let no one doubt concerning the goodness of God; even if a person’s sins were as dark as night, God’s mercy is stronger than our misery. One thing alone is necessary; that the sinner set ajar the door of his heart, be it ever so little, to let in a ray of God’s merciful grace, and then God will do the rest.” Saint Augustine summarized all this in what is considered by many to be his most famous passage from The Confessions:

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!
Lo, you were within,
but I outside, seeking there for you,
and upon the shapely things you have made
I rushed headlong – I, misshapen.

You were with me, but I was not with you.
They held me back far from you,
those things which would have no being,
were they not in you.

You called, shouted, broke through my deafness;
you flared, blazed, banished my blindness;
you lavished your fragrance, I gasped; and now I pant for you;
I tasted you, and now I hunger and thirst;
you touched me, and I burned for your peace.

The saint who experiences the glory, majesty and beauty of God never wants to go back to their former old self (c.f. Eph. 4:24). The former atheist turned monk Blessed Charles Foucauld wrote this striking line in his diary: “The moment I realized that God existed, I knew that I could not do otherwise than to live for him alone.”

This part of the story alone is an amazing and beautiful illustration of God's mercy and redemption. But, recall that Jesus is addressing two groups – the tax collectors and the Pharisees. The tax collectors are like the young son who does not *deserve* the inheritance that God promised, but God, through his abundant mercy (c.f. 1 Peter 1: 3), demonstrates in turn his power. We now, though, turn to the 'older son' who was out working in the field.

The story continues:

Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean.

The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him.

He said to his father in reply, '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. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.'

He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'"

St. Thomas Aquinas writes in his Summa how 'virtue' is the mean -- or middle point -- between two extremes. A key virtue, and what is considered by most saints to be the most essential virtue, is the virtue of humility. A professor I had in graduate school once jokingly said, "Humility is the virtue I am most proud of." Virtue is the middle point between two extremes. One extreme is obvious – the sin of pride. The opposite is less obvious – the sin of despair or discouragement. The prodigal son could have chosen despair, but instead chose the road of hope and forgiveness. Discouragement is seen in Catholic spirituality as a tool of the devil. St. Ignatius of Loyola talks in his Spiritual Exercises how the devil wants to keep us in a state of despair and discouragement – "Discouragement is not from God" wrote the great saint. Ignatius also wrote, "Sin is unwillingness to trust that what God wants for me is only my deepest happiness."

Jesus will mention at one point the 'unforgivable sin' -- namely, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Traditionally this is seen as a recalcitrance towards God's offer of mercy. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains: "There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss." This was the great and primary mission of St. Faustina – to spread the message of God's mercy to the world, thereby bringing more and more people to trust that God is the font of mercy. The prodigal son finds the middle point and is welcomed into the great banquet feast.

The older son represents the Pharisees and all those who struggle with pride -- namely all of us. St. Vincent de Paul wrote, "If we possessed every virtue, but lacked humility, those virtues would be without root and would not last." The older son is 'obedient' and 'serves' (like Martha in Luke 10), but is lacking in the 'one thing' (c.f. Luke 10: 42) that really matters. St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 13, "If I speak in the

tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing." The older son is like the person who does all the right externals, but his heart is still not a heart full of love.

The book of Revelation chapter 2 has this striking line:

I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: *You have forsaken the love you had at first.* Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

The older son is in the Father's house, but he lacks mercy and love. Jesus says in Matthew 9: 13: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." The older son hints at his self-centered focus of who will be at the feast he desires – a feast for 'me and my friends'. This parable, like all the parables, is about the Kingdom of God. The vision of Jesus is much wider than our own. The Kingdom of God is not about 'me and my friends'; but the universal call to holiness is among 'every race and tongue and every people and nation' (Rev. 7:9). Indeed, who God calls to the banquet is beyond our imagination.

The older son, too, is quick to point out the sin of his brother, but ignores his own failings and weaknesses. St. Paul in his letter to the Romans chapter 1 has a lengthy passage about the various sins. He writes regarding sinners:

They are filled with every form of wickedness, evil, greed, and malice; full of envy, murder, rivalry, treachery, and spite. They are gossips and scandalmongers and they hate God. They are insolent, haughty, boastful, ingenious in their wickedness, and rebellious toward their parents. They are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know the just decree of God that all who practice such things deserve death, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

I remember years ago when I did my first in-depth study of the book of Romans, reading this passage and vividly thinking about *other* people. I focused on the word 'they' in the beginning. "Other people are all these things", I very cleverly and subconsciously thought to myself. But then St. Paul, almost foreknowing there would be millions like me, goes right to the zinger in chapter 2:1: "Therefore, you are without excuse, every one of you who passes judgment. For by the standard by which you judge another you condemn yourself, since you, the judge, do the very same things." In other words, "All fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Indeed, all of us are like the older son as well.

And how specifically are we like the older son? Do I sometimes see myself as better than others? Am I judgmental and unmerciful to those I meet and those I see on the street? Do I judge people based upon the color of their skin, their nationality or any other external characteristic? Am I simply too arrogant to see any of the above, but am quick to see the sins of others? All of this requires a 'hard look' at ourselves and the parable of the prodigal son invites us into that self-examination.

The parable seems to end, though, without a true resolution. The father goes out and pleads with the older son to come in and celebrate with his brother who was lost and has been found. What does the older son do? Did Jesus fail to end the story? Was this an oversight on the part of the Gospel writers? A possible explanation is that maybe Jesus wants *us* to end the story. What would I do? Can I show mercy to those who have hurt me? Can I show mercy to those within my own family? Can I be a person of mercy even to the one who has not asked for forgiveness? Can I forgive a parent who hurt me so badly by what he or she has done (or failed to do)? Can I move past old hurts and grudges and move on to live in freedom as a child of God?

The Prodigal Son is a parable that encapsulates the Christian life and the heart of God. It is universal in that it tells *our* story -- the story of broken humanity, but also of God's redemption and forgiveness. It is the story of mankind's wandering, but also of the 'hound of heaven' (Gerard Manley Hopkins) who pursues us even to the darkest place and in our darkest hour. It is the story of how God's forgiveness should lead us to be more merciful to those around us. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy' (Matt. 5:7).

St. John of the Cross wrote, "In the twilight of life, God will not judge us on our earthly possessions and human success, but rather on how much we have loved." Thus, we end with the famous prayer by St. Patrick:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.
I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through a belief in the Threeness,
Through a confession of the Oneness
Of the Creator of creation.
Amen.

