

## 03/06/16 ..... 4 Lent C

*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*

-- This week we focus upon a particular spiritual work of mercy: to forgive injustices. And what better parable to discuss this than the parable of the Prodigal Son or, if you like, the parable of the forgiving father.

-- Even though it's only in Luke's gospel, it's very well-known—so well known that we often get distracted from its real meaning. It's important to remember that this whole story starts when people are complaining about the company Jesus keeps at dinner.

-- He tells the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin before this story. But this story is about a family—perhaps that's why it touches so many people so closely.

-- Certainly the younger son committed a great injustice. By asking for his inheritance early he was, in effect, wishing that his father was dead. His lifestyle was obviously selfish as well.

-- Even when he realized he could not sustain it, his motive for coming home was a bit self-centered. Old-fashioned Catholics would call this "imperfect contrition."

-- But the older son was also committing a great injustice. Granted, he hadn't gone out and squandered his father's money. But there seemed to be little love in him, since he almost regarded himself as a slave. And he dishonored his father by refusing to celebrate with him out of self-righteousness.

-- But what does the father do? He accepts his younger son, even with his so-called imperfect contrition. He lavishes his love upon him. And as for the older son, he reminds him of the great gifts he has and how he also is greatly loved.

-- In short, he seeks to reconcile his family. He wants to forgive past sins, of all his family members. That is what the Father wants to do for us.

-- Of course, we don't find out what happens after the father's efforts: Does the older son come back into the party? How does the younger son behave after his disastrous adventure? Jesus keeps these questions open, and, I believe, deliberately so.

-- That's because forgiveness and reconciliation are a process. It's not a matter of saying "I forgive you" and everything is OK. We have to work at it. Which makes it urgent that we not put it off any longer.

-- Most of us, at one time or another, have been in the role of both the younger and the older son. There are times we've gone our merry way and regretted it. And there are other times we've been the dutiful son or daughter and felt cheated when forgiveness was given to someone we think didn't deserve it.

-- You'll notice I have a picture in front: it's a print of Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Since the background is dark, it's difficult to see the details unless you get up close. But the details of the father, his younger son, the older son on the right, are all telling.

-- One thing you'll notice is that the two hands of the father are very different. One is big and strong; the other is smaller and tender. It shows us the two aspects of the Father's love for us, strong and tender. I hope you can take a closer look at it after Mass.

-- Some of you may recognize that this picture normally hangs in the Reconciliation Room in back of Church. That is because God is reconciling us to himself, particularly in that sacrament.

-- I hope, if you haven't done so yet this Lent, you'll take the opportunity to experience sacramental reconciliation. And I hope you will reach out to someone whom you need to forgive, or ask forgiveness from.