

031410 A MAN HAD TWO SONS...

(This parable of Jesus is one of his most famous. It reveals more than we think at first.)

The story of the Prodigal Son or the Forgiving Father is one of Jesus' most well-known stories. You have heard it enough yourselves that you could stand up here and give the homily. The squandering son and the resentful brother and the patient father are all very familiar to us. Jesus begins the story with the sentence: "A man had two sons...." As he tells the story we begin to get a sense for each of these sons, the younger first and then the older. In neither instance, though, do they fulfill the adage, "Like father, like son."

When the younger son approaches the father with the request it sounds almost polite and respectful. "Father, give me the portion of the estate that is coming to me." But beneath the polite sounding words is something very harsh and cruel. Just look at your own experience of life. Inheritances do not come to us unless someone dies. By demanding his inheritance now, the son is actually saying two things: 1) "Dad, the only meaning you have in my life is money. There is no relationship." 2) "I can't wait around until you die to get the money, so give it to me now." Make no mistake, what the younger son is saying is this: "Hurry up and die old man. I wish you were dead so I could get my money." Imagine. "Hurry up and die. I wish you were dead." That meaning may not even be in the consciousness of the young man's mind but there is no doubt that the father is hearing the meaning loud and clear. And you can almost hear the words in today's language. "Gimme." "I'm outta here."

But the father doesn't die. Even though he is sorely wounded by his son's attitude. Actually it is the son who dies by adopting this attitude. And isn't that what the father recognizes and even says to the older son when the young man finally comes home? "Your brother was dead and has come back to life." Grace. Grace can do this. Grace alone can do this. But grace takes time, sometimes a long time. And so, we must never give up. Never.

The older son is no chip off the old block either. He carries the burden of being the oldest, the first born. Yesterday we had First Reconciliation and two of the little second graders independently of each other brought to my attention that they were the oldest in their families and that it wasn't easy being the oldest because there was more responsibility on them. I mentioned that there were also some benefits too because they got to experience things first and thus had more experiences to draw on and that people would come to them for their wisdom because of this. One of the little ones assured me that this was already the case. Hmmm. It is different being seven today.

But the older brother is brimming with indignance. You can almost feel the resentment. He is not a bad person. He is good, faithful, reliable. He is there. He didn't run away. He didn't go away. But he isn't happy either. He is bitter. You can hear it in his words "You never gave me so much as a kid goat to share with my friends." "You never...." We should be careful with the way we throw around the word Never or Always. They are loaded words that we use to make an impact. You can almost hear him say to his father: "You know dad, you could have done more for me. I've been here faithfully. You

owe me.” He begins to sound like his brother who also thought that the father “owed” him. The dutiful son won’t even acknowledge his brother. He refers to him as “your son.” And the issue that is stuck in this son’s craw is this: “You have forgiven him. All your forgiveness is doing is rewarding him for his sinful life.”

That’s one of the problems we have with forgiveness after all. We feel like if we forgive then we are losing something. We are afraid that if we forgive we will lose the justice that needs to be done to make things right and to salve the pain. We fear that if we forgive we will never be made whole. Actually what we find is that it is only when we forgive that we are made whole. Of course, we think this because we have very short memories. We forget the times when we were the ones who had sinned and stood in need of a forgiving embrace. And we have all, all, all been there.

Notice that the father goes out looking for both of his sons. Why? Because they are both lost, just in different ways. Fr. Imad who visited with us from Jordan last week spoke with me about this story one afternoon. He had a new perspective. He mentioned that in the Gospel of Saint Luke, Jesus tells three stories in a row. In the first a woman loses a coin in her home. In the second a shepherd loses one of his sheep in the pasture. In the third a father grapples with his lost sons. Lost money. Lost possessions. Lost relationships. People lose money, things and relationships. The money is lost in the home. The sheep outside the home. The son leaves home and then returns while the other son stays home but won’t enter the home and thus remains a lost and unhappy soul. In each case whether at home or away, whether money or possessions or relationships, the gracious Father helps us to find what we have lost. That is the point that Jesus seeks to make. If only be put our faith in his word.

Everyday in the morning I pray the Joyful mysteries of the rosary. When I get to the fifth mystery, Jesus is found in the Temple, I always pray in thanksgiving to God for having found me—over and over again. He never gave up. He followed me down all the lost paths of my life and brought me back over and over again until I finally came to my senses like the young fellow did. What have you lost? Your confidence? Your peace of mind? Your job? Your sense of direction in life? A child? A parent? A spouse? A longtime friend? Your happiness? Your satisfaction in prayer? Your sense of self? Have you allowed sin—greed, lust, anger, bitterness, unforgiveness to swallow you up? Are you feeling lost? Get to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Confess your sins. Admit what you have lost. Ask the Father to help you find it again.

Jesus began the story with these words: A man had two sons. Actually the man had three sons. Who is the third son? The third son is the son who is telling the story. The third son is the son who is like the Father—in all things. He who sees this Son sees the Father. This Son and the Father are one. This Son is the One who seeks out what is lost and finds it for his Father. This Son invites us to join with him in being like the Father, the obedient ones who know they have been found.