

An Empty Place at the Table

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From now until Easter, anyone who enters Sacred Heart Church here in Patterson will see an odd sight: in front of the main altar, seemingly out of place, a small table and an empty chair. They look so odd that I'm afraid one of our volunteers will swoop down and put them away before learning of their purpose.

For our Sacred Heart community this Lent, the empty chair at the table will call our minds first to the story of the Prodigal Son, the selfish young man who wanted his inheritance right now. He came to know his father's mercy and compassion only after making a disaster of his impetuous adventure (Luke 15:11-32). The table and chair before our altar represent the Prodigal Son's "place at the table," empty until he comes home to the Father's mercy. This image symbolizes both the parts of our lives that have not yet come home to God and at the same time the people whom we have excluded from our mercy and compassion.

Many of us are familiar with the story of the Prodigal Son. The parable we usually call the Prodigal Son is better be called "the Lost Son" because it is the climax to a series of three parables which Jesus uses to explain his table fellowship with sinners: the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-6); the Lost Coin (vs 7-10); and the Lost Son (vs 11-32). Even more, it is the story of "the Father Who Refuses to Give Up on His Son." The parable has inspired centuries of Christian reflection on God's mercy and our place in the dynamic of reconciliation. (For a recent example, read Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Random House paperback, 1994.)

To be honest, we need to see ourselves as both the younger son who finds unexpected mercy and the older son who refuses to extend mercy to his brother. As the younger son, we all have places in our hearts and lives that we have not yet entrusted to God's mercy and righteousness. We know it's stupid but...we leave a part of ourselves still wallowing in the pigsty of sin, self-indulgence, resentment, or fear. When will we wake up and bring everything home to God?

Our resemblance to the older son may be an even greater challenge for "faithful" Christians. The father has proclaimed a great feast to welcome home his lost son, but the older son responds with anger. He says to his father, "All these years I've been *slaving away* for you" (v 29); and he will speak of his brother not as "my brother" but only as "your son" (v 30). His language reveals that his internal condition is that of slave, not son. His supposed faithfulness has only made him impervious to his father's love and mercy. The great irony of the parable—and the challenge for churchgoing Christians—is to see that the seemingly faithful son is the real obstacle to family reconciliation and unity.

It's easy to get stuck in the role of the older son. "I was right. He was wrong." We exclude people and sometimes whole classes of people from our mercy and God's mercy, from that uncle in Modesto to the Shiites and Sunnis who can't seem to live together to the death row inmate who "deserves to die." Real mercy is not cheap or naïve, but costly and demanding. The Father invites us to make a start: come to the table, enter the feast.

Jesus leaves the ending of the story in our hands: Will the older son listen to his father and enter the feast of reconciliation and mercy? Will the father be stuck outside forever, still inviting the older son to reconsider? Will this family (our Christian family) ever get it together? Only our response or lack of response to the Father's mercy will bring this story to its conclusion.