

### Homily 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday Lent 2007

I must have heard the parable of the prodigal son a hundred times as a child. I can still see that old Southern Baptist preacher lean over the pulpit, and his pointing finger would rise into the air, and it seemed as though he was staring directly into my eyes as he exclaimed, "Repent from sinful living and return to the heavenly fold". I still get nightmares! But now from an older, hopefully wiser, perspective...this parable speaks to me in a different way. Today's reading seems...to me...to be all about who we invite to the table.

The scribes and Pharisees were appalled at the people that Jesus associated with, particularly those he chose to dine with. During the time this Gospel was written there were certain groups that were, socially, the lowest of the low. Members of this group included prostitutes (which included just about any single female living outside of a male relative's house), tax-collectors (because of their unseemly association with the occupying Roman forces), lepers, and all who were considered to be unclean... particularly swine herders.

Accused of guilt by association, Jesus decides to teach through use of a story involving a young man who, through a series of events, found himself in the position of being a "domestic swine technician". Jesus knew that these religious elite would immediately recognize that he was referencing one of society's "living dead". This was a person that one would never even make eye contact with... but who would be the butt of demeaning jokes whenever the decent members of society gathered together. No decent person would ever allow such a person to come to their table...much less, invite them.

Now...2000 years later...the table is still a secular icon of all that separates the worthy from the unworthy. Movies are even made from the concept...films such as "She's All That", "Can't Buy Me Love"...and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" made millions by shining a spotlight on the fact that we use our gathering together at table as a means to weed out the undesirable.

But the devout religious are surely not involved in such behavior...right? Well Jesus seems to think otherwise. He references a second son in the parable. This son was cut from a different cloth than his brother. He was the type of individual who said all the right things, behaved appropriately at all times, held to his commitments and honored all the laws. He was a good son. He stayed home and did all that his father expected of him.

But why did he do all that he did? What was the motivation for his life choices? Did this son have such love and devotion to his father that he experienced a complete pouring out of his wants and needs in order to be filled with all that his father needed and desired? Did the greater good of his father, supersede the urge to take care of his personal desires?

Not really it seems! The wayward brother's return brought out some truths about this brother...truths that his heart was not quite as pure as he would have others believe. This son had obviously seen his father mourn the absence of his wayward son. He has witnessed the suffering and worry that his father experienced day after day. He witnesses the joy the father experiences when the burden of his lost son is lifted. And yet, he not only refuses to share in his father's joy but he rejects the offer to join his father at the table celebrating the return of his brother. His pride and false

sense of entitlement take over and he is so filled with anger and hate that he cannot even refer to his brother by name...referencing him only as “your son” when speaking to his father.

All it takes is for his misfit brother to show up... and to be given something that he deems him to be unworthy of receiving...and his loving concern and respectful devotion to his father quickly falls by the wayside.

So which sins were the worst in this tale...greed, lust, and gluttony... or pride, wrath and a bit of envy? The Father judges neither son to be unworthy of a place at his table or in his heart. He validates the worthiness of the wayward son by **gifting** him with symbols of his love and affection. He reassures the other son that he will make all that he has available to him. Their worthiness is based on his gift of unconditional love, and not on anything that they have...or have not...done.

The scribes and Pharisees were great at judging who was worthy to come to their table and who was not. Jesus sees everyone as family, and family is always invited to the table. He uses this parable to attempt to reach the minds and hearts of all who will listen, including scribes and Pharisees of all times and places, and to demonstrate that invitations to his table can never be earned. The invitation to his table comes from him, and through him, and baptized and living in him we are all welcomed to the feast.

The question then is this. Is there someone that we deem unworthy to join us? Do we ever actively, or passively, exclude someone from this table simply because of who they are or what we think they have done?

Our greeting before Mass affirms that all are welcome here. We proclaim that we are a community that opens our arms and our hearts to the homeless, the alien, those released from prisons or still held prisoner by drugs or alcohol. Yet can we be sure that we could, without hesitation, offer a hug or handshake of peace, to someone that we know to be gay or lesbian, or of an ethnic background that we feel uneasy to be around? Divorced and remarried, post-abortion, HIV positive, emotionally or mentally ill, republican or democrat, liberal or conservative...are we truly able to erase the labels that that are used only to separate and divide? Can we really live the life promised us, and demonstrated for us, by Jesus?

The preacher who haunted my youth was right...we are to repent of our sinful ways. Reconciliation with the Father always begins with an examination of what we are doing to separate ourselves from the Lord's table and to humbly reconcile ourselves with God. But we must remember that our sins take many forms.

Jesus, through action and word, teaches that it is not our race, gender, sexuality, I.Q, vocation or socio-economic status that makes us worthy of a place at his table...and these things do not make us unworthy either. He found prostitutes and tax-collectors worthy to sit at his table... and he treated them in ways that allowed them to feel worthy.

Laetare Sunday... a day of rejoicing...look around and rejoice in the presence of each of our brothers and sisters joining us here, at our banquet, today. And pray...pray for the day that all of our brothers and sisters will feel loved enough, and welcomed enough, to come home and join us as well.