

Fourth Sunday in Lent C 2010

The fourth Sunday in lent is Laetare Sunday, half way through lent. It's at about this point that we start to grow a little weary of our Lenten discipline so the Church "lightens up" a bit this week, hence the rose colored vestments showing us a light at the end of the tunnel. It would be nice, too, if we heard a little good news. So it's in that context that we hear again the very familiar parable of the Prodigal Son.

I have heard it said that this parable of the Prodigal Son is really a drama in three acts. Act One: a younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, goes off to a "distant country," squanders the money, suffers degradation and starvation and ends up feeding pigs and eating garbage. When he's had enough he decides to return to his father, but he is hardly a model of repentance. His motivation is entirely self-serving, "How many of my father's servants have more than enough to eat, but here I am dying of hunger." He resolves to return and prepares a little speech, "Father I have

sinned against heaven and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son: treat me as you would one of your hired-hands.” His journey home begins, and we can almost hear him rehearsing his program for forgiveness.

Act two is the return of the Prodigal. While he is still in the distance, his waiting father sees him, “has compassion” and then runs, embraces him with great love. Jesus’ hearers would have gasped at the image of the father running, a strong cultural taboo in that society. The son launches into his well rehearsed speech, but in the embrace of the loving father one part of the speech is never uttered, “treat me as one of your hired-workers.” In another shocking gesture the father orders the son clothed in a robe and sandals. Far from being welcomed as a servant, the son is restored to family dignity and given the signet ring to act with the father’s authority. When I first studied this parable I wondered about the significance of the sandals until I learned that sandals were worn by free people, while slaves went bare-foot. This act ends with a

party ending like all the parables in Luke chapter 15. Finding must be celebrated.

In Act Three the spotlight is turned on the older brother. He is working the farm, as he has faithfully done for years. Hearing the unfamiliar sounds of a party he asks another servant to find out what's going on. When he hears, "Your brother has returned," he gets really angry and sulks outside the house. In an action as shocking as his running and embracing the little brother, the father goes out and pleads with his elder son, who, like his brother, has his own little speech he's been rehearsing in his heart for some time. "I have obeyed and served you all these years and you never so much as gave me a goat to celebrate with my friends. The father doesn't debate the issue, but simply says, "Look, you are here with me all the time, all I have is yours, but now comes and celebrate because your brother was dead and now he is alive; he was lost and now he is found." End of story. We never hear if the older brother joins the party.

Despite their different life journeys, the younger and older sons have the same image of the father. The younger son thinks that the way to return to the father's good graces is to be treated like a servant; the older one boasts that all these years he *has* been a faithful servant. Both define sonship in terms of servile obligations; each in his own way destroys the family. The story is really a story about the "prodigal father," lavish in love, who shatters the self-understanding of both sons and wants both to be free. St. Paul puts it succinctly, "You are no longer slaves but sons and daughters, and if a son or daughter, then an heir through God.

Living this parable becomes a challenge for our Lenten journey of returning to a loving father who breaks through our self-image as servants bent on pleasing a demanding master. This pardoning and prodigal God invites us to a family party freed from aimless wandering and resentful dutifulness.

And that my brothers and sisters, at this mid point in our Lenten journey is indeed very good news.