Fourth Sunday of Lent, Year C
2025

Instruments of Divine Mercy: Leave No One Behind.[1]

Today, we hear the parable that is commonly referred to as the "Prodigal Son." The word prodigal refers to spending money or resources recklessly and extravagantly. As we will see, the word prodigal is better applied to the father in the parable, who stands for God, our Heavenly Father. This parable gives us an insight into what drives the compassion of God, which often appears to us sinners as being reckless and extravagant.

Note that this parable responds to the scribes and Pharisees criticizing Jesus for associating with sinners, men, and women who did not take their religious obligations seriously. They abstained from attending the synagogue, worshipping at the Temple for the great feasts, following the Torah's prescriptions, or becoming wealthy through unethical practices. For Jesus to share a meal with such sinners without them first renouncing their sinful behavior ran the risk of approving or minimizing the seriousness of their sinful behavior. Using today's language, Jesus would be criticized for being too liberal, not being tough enough on sinners, too concerned with being inclusive, and focused on being liked rather than on the more demanding teachings of the Torah. However, we can surmise that the table conversations were not about the weather!

Now, let's look more closely at this parable. It is one of those parables of Jesus that surface in most of us resistance to its lesson. Many of us may secretly agree with the elder son who complains to his father, saying, "Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf" (Lk.).

This criticism calls to mind another parable of Jesus. An owner hired laborers to work in his vineyard, paying them all, including those who worked for only a couple of hours, the same wage as those who worked beginning in the early morning. The latter grumbled among themselves and complained to the owner, 'These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day's burden and the heat" (Mt. 20:12). Many of us would find that argument compelling.

To be consistent, we must include Jesus' forgiveness of the "Good Thief." Hanging next to Jesus on the cross, he turned to Jesus and asked for mercy. Jesus did not hesitate. "I assure you, this day, you shall be with me in paradise." At that moment, the bad thief became good. Here is a man we could

[1] This homily is based on the insights of Fr. Ron Rolheiser, OMI, in his podcast, “The Compassion of Jesus.”

assume had lived most of his life in opposition to God. Yet, at the last minute, he receives the same reward as those who spent their whole lives in God's service.

That same generosity or seemingly reckless spending of divine mercy includes deathbed conversions and extends to the Church's opposition to the death penalty. Regarding the latter, God's mercy includes the gift of time, though undeserved, but given with the hope that the most heinous sinner may respond to the grace of conversion and be saved. Most assuredly, additional purification will be necessary in purgatory. Still, they only need to renounce their sinful life and ask for mercy and forgiveness, and it will be given. Sadly, too many do not.

This parable also begins with both sons physically outside the father's house. They both also share the same spiritual space. Why do I say that? The younger son tells the Father, "Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me." Notice the son's disrespect toward his father. Notice, too, how the relationship with his father is purely contractual. He is saying, "I can't wait for you to die to receive my inheritance. I want it now." Notice, too, the violent nature of those words.

Now, let's listen to the elder son's words to his father upon his younger brother's return. He says, "Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends." (Lk. 15:30). He was obedient, knowing he would eventually receive the material rewards in the form of his inheritance. Unlike his brother, he did not ask for it immediately. He was willing to bide his time. That is why he shares the same spiritual space with his younger brother. Whenever we slip into thinking God owes us an eternal reward because we have lived a good life, we have adopted the mindset of these two sons.

Let's look at the Father's response to his elder son. He says, "My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found" (Lk. 15: 31-32). What is going on here? The father stands for our Heavenly Father, who cannot rest until both sons are inside the house or in heaven. Only then will the family be whole. The desire for wholeness drives God's compassion.

We hear about Catholics who no longer practice the faith. They are outside the house, the church. Some say let them go. It is better to have a Church composed of dedicated and committed believers. Many who have left the Church are members of our families, relatives, or neighbors. They are us.

Compare that attitude to the response of the father to both his sons. He went out daily, looking for his younger son to return and enter the house where he belonged. Later, he went out to speak to his elder son and encouraged him to come into the house where he, too, belonged. As I said earlier, the

father in the parable stands for our Heavenly Father, who cannot rest until everyone is in the house, in heaven, and for the family to be whole. God's desire for wholeness includes all humanity, most of whom are not us, be it politically, religiously, ethnically, economically, racially, and the like.

The itch for wholeness is what drives God's compassion. To that end, God will extend his mercy in ways that, from the vantage point of us fallen human beings, appear to be reckless and extravagant. That craving, itch, yearning, or pining for wholeness drove the good shepherd to leave the ninety-nine sheep to find the one that was lost. That yearning for wholeness drove the woman to tear up her house to find a missing coin, though it was of little worth. That craving for wholeness drives God's mercy and compassion for those lost, wounded by sin, or held captive by the Enemy. Think here of the Good Thief. The soldier's creed, "Leave no one behind," is a fitting motto for the Church, also called the Church Militant, because she is engaged in fighting the battles of the Lord. It is also a fitting motto for us Marists, who are to be instruments of divine mercy.

What awaits the repentant sinner is an extravagant heavenly celebration sanctioned by our Heavenly Father who, using the words of the father in the parable, declares, "Because this son or daughter of mine was dead, and has come to life again; they were lost, and have been found." Then, we are told that the celebration began. The earthly celebration mirrors the heavenly one that Jesus alluded to when he described the joy in heaven when one sinner repents. It includes every celebration of the Eucharist, which anticipates the heavenly banquet that awaits us because we, too, were once lost. Through Baptism and the Sacrament of Reconciliation[2], we, too, have been found.

[2] The Sacrament of Reconciliation is often referred to as a second Baptism because it restores grace and cleanses the soul of sins committed after Baptism