



Journey Through Lent 2010

Fourth Sunday of Lent (Year C)

March 14, 2010

Use this resource alone or with others. Used with others, read the reflections aloud, pausing between paragraphs. Invite each member of the group to take a turn reading, or prepare readers in advance for larger groups. Share with each other your Lenten commitments and promises, keeping within the silence of your own heart those things which belong only there.

Opening Ritual & Prayer

Light a candle. Open your Bible and set it beside the lit candle. Prepare the room for prayer, even if you are alone. Quiet music can help to settle yourself and others after a hectic day.

Leader: God of light be our beacon in the darkness.

All: Enlighten us, O God.

Leader: Jesus, you who are the light of the world, help us to walk in your light.

All: Enlighten us, O Lord.

Leader: May we all live as sons and daughters of the light.

All: Amen.

Read aloud yourself or have various members of the group read aloud the Scripture. Readings for the Fourth Sunday of Lent (Year C): Josh 5:9a, 10-12; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32.

Reflection on the Gospel Reading

Of all the parables of Jesus in the Gospels the parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the most familiar. It could also be entitled the parable of the compassionate and forgiving father since this is exactly what the father in the story does in relation to his wayward son.

The assumptive world of the parable is that of a wealthy family, with considerable household property and servants. The younger brother's request to be given the property that falls to him has a callous ring about it. Strictly speaking, a share of

the property should accrue to him on his father's death. His demand for it now says to the father, "You're as good as dead as far as I am concerned." Very soon, of course, the younger son's dissolute style of living squanders the entire sum. He is in a foreign country; his hunger forces him to become a hired laborer to one of its citizens; the work he is given is, for a Jew, the most degrading imaginable: feeding pigs. He even envies the pigs' food.

While in the pig sty the son has a "coming to himself," "a moment of realism," what colloquially might be expressed as an "aha" moment. The young man calculates that the hired hands on his father's farm, though only servants, have at least food enough to eat. Better to join them in their servitude than to die of hunger in this foreign place. So he prepares a set speech to win over his father: *"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."*

As the younger son makes his return home; the father, who represents God, re-enters the story. He catches sight of his son while he is still "far off." This gives the impression that the father spends his days ever on the watch for his son's return. Then when he sees the returning son, the Father, filled with compassion, the father runs to him and embraces, and kisses him. This is a totally unconventional behavior for a dignified man of affairs in the Palestinian culture of the day. To leave the house to meet one of lower rank, to run rather than walk sedately, to display emotion extravagantly in public; all this involves serious loss of face and dignity. It smacks of a serious lack of propriety. And that is not all. The speech the son has prepared is cut off by the father before the son says the part about becoming one of the hired hands. Orders are quickly given by the father; bring out the best robe (the baptismal garment), put a ring on his finger (the seal of inheritance, gifts of the Spirit), sandals on his feet (discipleship). All symbolize complete reinstatement as a member of the family. Finally, there is to be a communal celebration with the calf that has been fattened. The reason: *"Because this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and is found."*

Now the parable turns its attention to the older brother, who, as he will later remind his father, has been out in the field working all day. He is surprised at the sound of music and dancing, sure signs of a celebration. A servant reports: *"Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."* Immediately overcome with anger and resentment, the older brother refuses to go in and join the party.

Again, the father — who in the parable represents God — forsakes his dignity as host and leaves the house to meet his older son. Patiently he listens while the son pours out his resentment, directed in the first instance against the father himself: *“Look, all these years I have served you... 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.”* The older son disowns his brother, referring to him simply as “your son” (his father, too, he bluntly addresses as “you”). What he resents particularly is that his younger brother has squandered the family property, lessening the amount that will eventually fall to him.

Once again, the father makes his explanation. He first dwells upon their own immediate relationship: *“My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours.”* Whatever the older brother may have felt, there was never any doubt in the father’s mind that he was a son. Had he wanted a calf to celebrate with his friends he had only to ask or perhaps simply take. Then, as regards the younger brother, comes the now familiar refrain on the lips of the father: *“We must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.”* Where the older brother sees life in terms of a contract relationship — one his younger brother has forfeited — for the father the younger brother is more important than what he has or has not done; he can never cease being a brother and a son. And as a brother and a son he has returned.

And there the story ends. We never learn whether the older brother was persuaded, whether he went in to join the music and the dancing or remained outside, stubbornly and bitterly nursing his anger.

And this is precisely where the parable makes its point. The older brother’s reaction is in many ways reasonable, one with which many might be inclined to agree. The father has acted extravagantly, certainly with over-tolerance. The story invites the audience of every age to feel the older brother’s anger and maybe recognize in themselves several aspects of his resistance. It leaves the question, *“Well, where are you at the end of the story?”* Are you inside joining in the celebration or stuck outside, too angry to go in?

Ultimately, this parable conveys to its original audience and to us an image of God. Can we embrace a God imaged as the forgiving father in this parable? Or do we find in ourselves some stirrings of the resistance of the older brother? Can we be part of a family whose hospitality is so extravagant, so uncalculating, and as accepting of human failing as this? Are we comfortable with a God who acts

compassionately with the foolishness of love, forgiving us no matter what our actions may be? This is the God we are challenged to encounter this Lent and seek God's forgiveness while not envying those who are forgiven.

Questions for Reflection

- ✚ What gifts from God have you squandered in your own life?
- ✚ With which one of the characters in the story do you identify and why?
- ✚ Whom has God forgiven and you have not?

Closing Prayer

Leader: We have all sinned and left the home of our God.

All: Compassionate God forgive us.

Leader: Gracious God help us to know and believe that you will always welcome us back into your family.

All: Amen

Exchange a greeting of peace with all who are present.