

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday OT – Luke 15:1-32

### *Prodigal Son*

Remember last Sunday's Gospel, where Jesus said in very strong terms that one must hate parents, spouse, siblings, and even oneself in order to be his disciple, remember? Well, that didn't discourage all the tax collectors and sinners from flocking to him to listen. The Pharisees and scribes were shocked and they told him so. Jesus replied to their criticism with three parables. I only read the third one today.

Yet each parable has its surprises. The *first short parable* is a shepherd leaving 99 sheep in the wilderness to find the one that is lost. Which of you, he asks the Pharisees, would do this? A Pharisee would not even keep sheep, since they thought it an unclean occupation. The *second* short parable is a woman lighting a lamp and sweeping a house, to find a lost coin. The feast for her friends could have cost her the value of the coin!

The third parable is about a father, who disobeys the orders of Proverbs to discipline his son but watches out for his return. By giving him a robe, a ring, and sandals, he restores him to a higher position after his sin than he had before. As for the surly elder son who refused to join in the feast, he pleaded with him as his son.

Thus, Jesus understands God. He is like the shepherd looking for the sheep, like the woman looking for the coin, like the father watching for the first son and pleading with the second. The Pharisees should have known all this from their knowledge of the prophets of Israel. "I will seek the lost," he had told Ezekiel. "Could a woman feel no pity for the child she has born," he had said through Isaiah? And through Hosea, he had described Israel as "the child he loved". Luke wanted his readers to know God as Jesus knew him. His is an extravagant love which the Pharisees could not grasp and so they could not share the joy of Jesus at table with the sinners who were coming to repentance. He had come into the world to save sinners.

Our God is the God of the Prodigal Son, who continues to invite us to stay for the right reason, who continues to invite us to return for the right reason, and that is for the love of one another. Like the father of the Younger and the Elder Son, this father hopes to bring both his sons back together for the love of one another, whenever and however that might happen.

Ronald Rolheiser writes that "...we are made for love. We are made for intimacy with each other and with God. As Saint Augustine so classically put it, "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." But the deep meaning of our longing is not always so obvious...We have trivialized and tamed our longing. Instead of longing for the transcendent, we anesthetize and distract ourselves by focusing our desires on the good life, on sex, on money, on success, and on whatever else everybody has (maybe to the point of the prodigal son). There is nothing bad about these things, but if we define our deepest longings as directed towards these things in themselves, we end up mostly disappointed and empty...Ultimately our restless aching is a yearning for God. We need to connect with God. We need prayer. We know this, both in our more reflective moments and in our more desperate moments. It is then that we feel our need for prayer and try to go to that deep place."

It is a long quote, but it says it all. The younger son was very restless, trying to find what he already had at home. Sometimes we need to leave home in order to discover what we had all along. And sometimes I think that the older son would have been better off if he had left with the younger, since the reason he stayed was for the wrong reason. And I would hope the younger son would realize how much his father loved him, despite the weak reason he returned, to be treated at least as good as the hired help. I also would hope the older son would realized how much his father loved him, despite the weak reason he stayed in the hope he would at least get a goat out of all his work.

Some stay in the Church but are not happy because everyone is not following the rules. After today's gospel, I believe that even God doesn't keep track. Others stay in the Church but are not happy because they keep looking for the pastor who will tell them what they want to hear, no challenge there. Some leave because one particular thing upsets them, but rather than saying anything, they use it as an excuse because they were going to leave anyway. I could go on, but the real reason should be why do we stay? I hope it is because of each other! That is why I am staying, but also because of the great God that we have and I'm forever learning more about this wonderful God through you.