

4th Sunday Lent – Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Prodigal Father means Reckless, Generous, Extravagant Father

The **first son** abandoned three aspects of his living with his family by abandoning them, his nation, and his religion. He left his family to live among foreigners, making no attempt to seek help in his troubles from his many fellow exiles. He worked among pigs, unclean animals, a fact which showed that the religion for which his ancestors had suffered so much meant nothing to him. *But God had not abandoned him; he came to himself and was able to admit his sin and its effects. He was prepared to live as a slave; he realized he had no claim on his family, nation or God.

The **elder son** had not been wasting time looking-out for his brother. He was hard at work. His questions to the servants show that they knew more about his family than he did. His father came out to plead with him. He neither addressed his father as father nor spoke of his brother as his brother. The calf that had been slaughtered, he understood in terms of pay, not as a gift or a token of joy. He would not accept his place in the family, preferring his life as a servant. *His father did not rebuke him; he just spoke of the good news of the return of his other son.

The father's concern for his son was such that he put aside normal ways of behavior for a man of his culture. Instead of disinheriting his son, he watched out for him. Seeing him far away, he ran out to greet him. He did not allow his son to finish his speech of repentance. Before he had finished speaking, he installed him with greater authority than before, symbolized by robe, ring and sandals. Forbidden to be a servant, he is awarded a status higher than ever in his family. *Obviously, the Father unconditionally loved both his sons!

Did the elder son go into the feast? Did the Pharisees recognize themselves in the elder son? Do we? We can name plenty of people who fit both sons, but what about ourselves? At what point do we realize that Lent should be more than just naming our sins especially those of others who **seem** worse than us. Once we compile this list, what should we do with it? Eventually I hope our focus will come back to the father, who is really the most important person in the parable. Jesus is responding to his critics, the Pharisees and Scribes with their tendencies to count all the ways one can sin against God.

Focusing on God will be more fruitful than listing our sins and those of others. *After all, it is God who can and will forgive us in the end. After all, God is the

Prodigal Father. Webster defines the word **Prodigal** as exceedingly or recklessly wasteful, extremely generous, extremely abundant. Our God is all the above with his love for us.

Nature seems to mimic the Prodigal Father in many ways. One example is in springtime when millions of pollen fills the air, but only one is needed to pollinate the flower. Those of us with hay fever sometimes suffer from God's prodigal nature, but never from his love. Yet how many time have we ignored the beauty in nature all around us? There are billions of people living on this planet, yet how many actually are aware of God's steadfast love for us? Throughout the centuries God continues to journey with us personally through his presence in our conscious, and through his Son's presence in our Eucharist. But it does not end there, *since Jesus continually suffers and dies with us until the end of the world. "Paul, Paul, why do you persecute me."

A Liturgy that is rich in the Divine Attributes of God, brings us closer to understanding how rich God's love for us is. God is love, God is also good, beauty, truth, and just. Needless to say, a Liturgy that is very restrictive can't also be prodigal. An example that I have learned is from the Liturgies in Africa when I lived in Malawi, Zambia, and Kenya. The Liturgies were in the native tongues, not English, the tongue of the conquering colonial power. Their Liturgy was sung in native melodies, rich in tradition and meaning, as Saint Ambrose's hymns were in the Liturgy of Milan, Italy. When filled with dancing which was natural to the African people, the whole body was involved and moved with the music, not confined by kneelers. The vestments are rich in traditional colors that also speak to the people of their culture through the Kinte patterns in the cloth, not necessarily in the color coding. Added to this the African carvings of their saints, new and old, and the architecture. Now one can be transported to a sacred place that was not only familiar but heavenly. Only then can God's prodigal love make sense to those open to the gospel message, where the father put a ring on son's finger, sandals on his feet, and covered him with a robe, the traditional symbols in Jesus' time. That gospel comes alive when a prodigal God open to all cultures simply through his love.

But the Prodigal Father's love for us is meaningless unless we leave our Eucharistic Celebration to bring his Son Jesus out into the world as Ambassadors of God's divine and everlasting love within us. This is modeled for us by Saint Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles of many cultures. And we are gentiles, but we are also Jewish through Jesus Christ, Josua Ben Josef, who lives on in our very Jewish liturgy despite our additions!