

Cycle C 4th Sunday of Lent

Reading 1, Jos 5:9a, 10-12

The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you." While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth of the month. On the day after the Passover, they ate of the produce of the land in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain. On that same day after the Passover, on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased. No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

Responsorial Psalm, Ps 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7

R. (9a) Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth. Let my soul glory in the LORD; the lowly will hear me and be glad.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Glorify the LORD with me, let us together extol his name. I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame. When the poor one called out, the LORD heard, and from all his distress he saved him.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Reading II, 2 Cor 5:17-21

Brothers and sisters: Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Gospel, Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So to them Jesus addressed this parable: "A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, '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.' So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began. Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, '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.' He said to him, '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.'"

Have you heard the story about the priest and his rabbi friend commiserating about their problems with bats in the bell tower of the church and the attic of the synagogue? The rabbi admitted to shooting at the creatures which did nothing but put holes in the roof. The priest offered that this used to be a problem, but after he baptized and confirmed them, he never saw them again.

Every year we baptize and confirm many of our children. Some of us, I know, are concerned that we may not see them in church very much in the years to come. But, I am not that worried...let me explain. I don't deny that it seems like many young adults are walking away from the Church. But I am hopeful by what the Scriptures tell us today...that God loves us unconditionally as only a parent can...He waits for us...He comes to us to be in relationship with us...to make us a family. And, the Risen Christ never stops reconciling us to God. He calls each of us to be His ambassadors, making His love a reality for our children, our families and in fact with everyone we meet.

You see, our extended families in all their wonderful shapes and sizes, in all their messy disfunction, are so very important. It's true whether we are married or single, with or without kids, relationships with our extended families, including close friends, are important to us. I think it's our faith in God, be it weak or strong, that bonds us together...they become the core of our faith community. We can't make our families believe. But we can give them many experiences of God-in-their-lives with our parental love....we inspire each other with our "ambassadors-for-Christ" love, as the 2nd reading said. Without our efforts, all the words in the world about God would fall on deaf ears.

It used to be easier, I think, to raise children who would stay in the Church. All we had to do was go to church and send them to Catholic school or religion class. 56 years ago when Pat and I started dating, as a Presbyterian I quickly realized that I was being welcomed into a loving Chicago South-side Irish Catholic family...but I was also being welcomed into a special community. I immediately sensed that the daily involvement of their family and friends was bound together in a wide-ranging south-side Catholic faith community. It

was so naturally an integral part of their lives with St. Germaine Church and school two blocks away, and the two Catholic High schools, Mother McAuley for the girls and Brother Rice for the boys, within a mile of their home.

Life today is more secular and, in many ways, more privileged than years ago...we have to make an extraordinary effort to seek out relationships and participate in our faith community. But, it's within this faith community that our conscience is formed...that we come to recognize all that God has provided us. We can experience the Kingdom of God here and now with its openness, acceptance and love for all people. Though they may experience "Church" differently than we do, with the help of the Holy Spirit our children...our extended families...can be nurtured to be active witnesses to the Gospel. The Risen Christ in His many forms will never stop reconciling us to God. He is an unstoppable force of love and forgiveness. And, yes, we may even have to experience the Eucharist as a verb, not a noun, when we are with our children and families. As a father of two sons who with their wives are now awesome parents living the Gospel in their own right, believe me when I say, "there's life after teenagers. In fact, there is life after 20-something and 30-something!"

That brings us to today's Gospel on this 4th Sunday of Lent. The Third character we meet in the Gospel parable is the father, who is the most important figure. You see, he went out to both his sons...it didn't matter what they did or said to him...he loved them just as they were. He was outside of the house waiting for the younger son to return. And, when the son appears his father runs to him, embraces him in his arms, kisses him, brings him in and throws a party for him. But, not only does he come out of the house once, he comes out a second time to persuade the elder son to come in.

We need to strive to be like the compassionate father. In this parable it's the father's character and attitudes that we should use to measure ourselves, use to measure the capacities in our own hearts and souls to be Godlike in our love, compassion, care, and concern not only for our extended families, but in fact, for everyone. When people do

come back to Church, I think they have already rekindled their relationship with God some time ago in a faith community. We need to ask ourselves, when they come to us, who will welcome them...The compassionate father or the crabby, judgmental, self-righteous older brother? I know who I met 56 years ago.

When I see people with the freedom to wander away from the Church, I can't help but think they are searching for what they are leaving behind...just like the prodigal son did. It may take years for them to return, but if we didn't do our very best to always welcome everyone, and above all, to always share with them the love of Jesus Christ, then I would be much more concerned.

As someone said, for young adults, God and the Church...and their parents...become invisible for a time and must be re-discovered all over again. If we trust in God and trust that the seeds of faith have been firmly planted, God may be ignored for a while, but He will not be easily discarded. And we must be confident that during their search, the re-discovery of the treasure of God is being nudged along in our family's hearts by the Holy Spirit.

You know, we were not told at the end of the parable whether or not the elder son went into the party. I think the years of close relationship, and mutual love the father and sons have for each other will win the day. That should encourage us to persevere in our relationships with God, and with our children and extended families. Only then will we really be ambassadors ready to help make Christ's love a reality for everyone we meet. And, maybe then, who knows, they will want to join us to get more of what we have.

Amen.