

There are many words from a child that a parent longs to hear if said from the heart. Parents love to hear: “I love you” or “thank you for all you do”, “let me help”, “I cleaned my room”, “want to play a game?”. When a child has hurt themselves or someone else, words that can melt a parent’s heart are: “I’m sorry”. In fact, loving parents are hoping and praying that their child, for their own sake, is reconciled and feels themselves as a normal member of the family again, without shaming or love lost.

“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.”

In this Fourth Sunday of Lent, we heard the beautiful parable of the Prodigal Son which could perhaps be better titled the parable of the Compassionate Father. The wandering son’s emptiness was real, he freely left his father’s house and squandered his inheritance. This is an image for sin, when we leave God and find ourselves empty and lost. We might feel ashamed, anxious, and afraid to go home, possibly because we think of God as the self-righteous older brother.

The story doesn’t end there, and neither does ours. It’s right in the moment of feeling unworthy and filled with self-loathing because of our own decisions, that Jesus calls us to remember this loving father who represents our Heavenly Father. The memory of God’s love for us and His goodness softens our heart to return to Him. We never earned God’s love, we don’t “deserve” it, it’s a gift. We don’t lose the Lord’s love either, in fact, Jesus says that there is more joy in heaven when we say from our hearts “I’m sorry” than for people who think they never need to seek mercy.

Lent is the perfect time to receive the sacrament of the Lord’s mercy. People will sometimes joke with me when I bring up confession and say, “Oh father, you’d need to take half a day with me”, but we are worth that, and more to Jesus. I often ask the kids before confession if they are a little nervous and most of them raise their hands but then I ask them afterwards if they feel better, and all of them raise their hands.

We spend so much time in Lent focusing on improving our relationship with the Lord and growing in more intentional discipleship through our fasting, prayer, and almsgiving/good works and rightly so! However, it’s good to be reminded by this touching parable that we don’t earn the Lord’s love by these works, it’s His goodness that inspires them. Goodness inspires us to sacrifice, work harder and be our best, not slavish fear or shame. The father wanted his younger son to be restored to full status as a son and it was the memory of the father’s virtue and compassion that inspired the prodigal to come home.

We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, so let’s try to work through our fears and go to our Heavenly Father, trusting in His goodwill toward us.

Whichever of the two sons we identify with more, the Lord wants us to know that we are not simply servants but beloved children. We can imagine God the Father saying to us like the father did to his son: ***“You are my son, you are my daughter, everything I have is yours.”***

God bless,

Fr. Mike