

Fourth Sunday of Lent: Stories of Mercy and Compassion

A Prodigal son. A Forgiving Father. We have heard today's parable so many times that most of us can repeat it almost line for line. It is such a beautiful story told by the Lord with so much drama that we can vividly picture each scene. We can see the nasty younger son, demanding his piece of the inheritance so he can spend it foolishly. We see the scene of his wild parties and then his so-called friends deserting him when his money ran out. We can picture his disgust at the smell of the pigs, and here he was, a Jew, feeding pigs and longing to eat pig slop. We can picture the father, looking out across the fields every day hoping that perhaps his son will return, and then the tears of joy when he saw the boy. We can picture the older brother, furious that the one who had caused his family so much pain was now being welcomed back into the fold. And we can see the pain of the father when the older brother refuses to join in the Banquet of the Father's Love.

Perhaps, though, the parable is so familiar that it has lost its impact.

I want to share two true stories with you to help you, and me, restore the parable's impact and, perhaps, come a deeper understanding of the Jesus' whole point, the healing mercy of God the Father.

Recently I had dinner with a close friend, a doctor who I've known since she was a 15 year old girl at Clearwater Central Catholic High School. She runs a wonderful free clinic in Orlando. Now, I had breakfast with her about eight months ago. At that time she told me the story of a young girl she was trying to help. I asked her at dinner how the girl was doing, and my doctor friend told me the rest of the story. What had happened was that about three years ago, when the young girl was 15, she got into a huge fight with her parents. She decided to run away. She ended up roaming around an expensive mall in Jacksonville where she lived. A young man approached her and asked her if she wanted to go to a party. That was all that it took. That very night she was drugged and sold to numerous men. She was taken away from Jacksonville and moved to Orlando hidden in the horrible underbelly created by sex traffickers. The men who stole her convinced her that her parents would be ashamed with what she had been doing, as though it was all her fault. How could they explain her to their friends? They convinced her that her parents would be better off if they just thought she was dead. They certainly would never want to see her again. Eventually, she decided that she had no choice but to embrace the appalling life thrust upon her.

Three years went by before she got away from her captives and went to the free clinic. She would not tell anyone there her name. She didn't want them to contact her parents. She was too embarrassed. My doctor friend met with her over and over, and established a rapport with her. After about three months, the doctor finally convinced her that all her parents wanted was to have her back again. So she told the doctor her name. With the doctor and others leading her in prayer, she prayed for her parents. Then she made the call. Can you imagine the joy of those parents who had feared that their daughter was dead and then heard her voice on the phone? Volunteers

brought her home. Can you imagine the hugs and kisses and tears of joy? This daughter who was lost has now come back home. The parents didn't care about her running away. Nor did they care about the things she was forced to do, or eventually chose to do. They only cared that their daughter was back. That is a hint of the joy that God our Father has when someone who has run away from him comes back home. God is that forgiving Father who just wants to have his wayward children back.

The second story I want to share with you is the story of Frankie and the farm. Frankie's family lived in a suburb of Chicago, but he had grandparents who had a large farm in Iowa. Every summer his family would spend two weeks on the farm with grandma and grandpa. The kids loved it. They would play with the animals, go swimming and fishing. Every day was an adventure. When Frankie was 11, the summer just before his sixth grade, his grandpa asked him if he would like to work one of the tractors. "Are you kidding? Of course." So Grandpa taught him how to run one of the big rigs. Frankie took to it like a natural. Even Grandpa was shocked at how easily he learned it. So he told him, "Next summer, if you want, you can come a month before your parents and help me out at the farm running a tractor." Of course Frankie wanted to do this. That whole school year, he was looking forward to going to Iowa. When the summer came, with just a day or two of training by Grandpa, Frankie was there, a little guy on a big rig.

Now Grandpa told Frankie that he could only run the tractor in the morning. After lunch, Grandpa wanted him to play with the other children from the local farms. So that was his summer, working the tractor in the morning, swimming, fishing and just having fun with the other kids in the afternoon.

And then the Fourth of July approached. One of the kids had firecrackers. Grandpa saw them and told Frankie that he had to be very careful. This was a dry summer and a little spark could set off a huge fire that would destroy all the crops. Frankie and the others could only set off the fireworks away from the fields. So they decided to play with them near the farmhouse. Actually, right under the kitchen window. Grandma was furious. "You children need to get away from the house. You'll destroy my baking." So the kids went about halfway between the farmhouse and the fields. Soon most of the fireworks were gone, except for the sparklers. Someone got the idea that they should light sparklers and throw them. They would look just like comets. "Cool!" Frankie agreed. So they started throwing lit sparklers. Then they decided to see who could throw one the farthest. You know what happened. One of the sparklers set the grass on fire. The children tried to stomp the flames out, but the fire quickly spread to the fields. The entire crop, acres and acres of corn, went up in flames. The firemen came, the neighboring farmers came, but the best they could do was save the farmhouse and the barn. At the end of the day, Grandpa saw all his hard work destroyed. Exhausted, covered in soot and sweat, he asked, "Where's Frankie?" "Has anyone seen Frankie?" No one had. Grandma began to cry, perhaps Frankie had died in the flames. Then Grandpa said, "I think I know where he is." So Grandpa went down to the swimming hole. And there was Frankie, sitting on a rock, sweaty, filthy, shaking and crying. When he saw his Grandfather approaching, he was

convinced that he would get clobbered. Certainly, his grandfather wouldn't want to have anything to do with him anymore. But Grandpa went up to him, put his arm around him and said, "Boy, let's go home." At the end of the summer he even invited Frankie to come back the next year.

Frankie didn't just learn a lesson about obedience; after all, none of this would have happened if he had listened to his Grandpa. More than this, Frankie learned a profound lesson about mercy and forgiveness. Frankie told this story many years later.....after he was ordained a priest. You see, he wanted others to experience the mercy and love of God as he had experienced it in his grandfather. He wanted to be a vehicle of God's love for others. He had to become a priest.

The Forgiving Father does not want us sitting in misery on our rocks, overwhelmed with guilt and shame. No, the Forgiving Father wants to embrace us and bring us home.

This is Laetare Sunday, the Sunday where we express joy that the celebration of our redemption is only three weeks away. But there is more to our joy than that. This is the Sunday when we come to a more profound understanding of how deep our Father's love is for us. He doesn't care about what we have done. He doesn't care about how we have hurt him, whether its squandering his money, running away from home and embracing a horrible life, destroying his hard work in the fields, or whatever it is that might lead us to sit on a rock shuddering in shame. All that God the Father cares about is that we were lost, but now are found. He just wants to put his arm around us and say, "Let's go home."

Three stories, one a parable and two real life stories, give us a hint at how deep is God's mercy, and how profound is his compassion.

May we have the humility to seek forgiveness. And may we forgive others as we have been forgiven.