

Fourth Sunday of Lent: The Value of Our Inheritance

We have all heard the story of the Prodigal Son many times. This evening/morning, I would like to look at the parable in what might be a different way to help us to comprehend the depth of God's mercy.

We Americans move about quite a bit. There is a thriving real estate market throughout the country. Few people die on the same property where they were raised. Now, we may have second thoughts about selling the our house, but we rarely have second thoughts about selling the land on which the house is standing. An exception might be among some farming families who can trace their ownership of their farm back for many generations. But even those whose families have owned their land the longest in the United States cannot trace their family's ownership before the sixteenth century. Perhaps Native Americans can trace their ownership of land before then, but they certainly cannot go back a thousand years, if any could go that far back.

We sell property with the same ease as we sell anything. We might have a family tie to the land, but that is usually sentimental.

The ancient Hebrews were not attached to their property for sentimental reasons. Far more, they saw their land as a gift from God, as their portion of the Promised Land. When the Exodus from Egypt ended and the Hebrews defeated the Canaanite, Hittites and other people living in the Promised Land, they divided up the land among each family. Since the Promised Land was given to them by God, then the property of each family was a share of God's gift.

This is best illustrated in the story of King Ahab and Naboth found in 1 Kings 21. King Ahab wanted the property adjacent to his vineyard, property that Naboth owned. He tried to convince Naboth to sell it to him. Naboth replied, "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral heritage." The only way for the king to get the land was if it could be shown that Naboth had lost the right to hold onto the property. That is exactly what Ahab's wife, the wicked queen Jezebel did. She had a letter sent to Naboth's village with King Ahab's seal demanding that the people there fast. Then all the people were called to assemble in the town square, with Naboth at their head. She paid two scoundrels to proclaim that Naboth had cursed God and king. Naboth was judged unworthy of owning the land. He lost his life, and his family lost their inheritance.

So you can see the heavy weight of the Prodigal Son's sins. As the younger of two brothers, he had a right to one-third of his father's property, after the father died, of course. He and his brother were expected to work the property for their father while he was still alive. But the younger son wanted his inheritance immediately. He then sold the property and took his money to a foreign country where he squandered everything. So, he didn't just sin against his father, he sinned against God. When the money ran out and he, a Jew, was forced to care for pigs, longing to eat their slop, he ran home. His father could have turned him away, saying that he could not have someone in his

house who had offended God, but he did not. Instead he gave a banquet for his lost son. Sadly, the elder brother was not so forgiving and excluded himself from the banquet of the Father's love.

Let's stay with the first part of the parable. The younger son, the prodigal, squandered his inheritance. He squandered his portion of the Promised Land given by God to his ancestors. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether we have cared for our inheritance or whether to some degree or other we have squandered our inheritance.

We are sons and daughters of God. We each have an inheritance, a portion of the Kingdom of God. We have been given the life of the Gospel, eternal life. When we sin, we commit an offence against Jesus Christ, God the Son, who gave us his life. That is why there is no such thing as an inconsequential sin. Every sin wears down or destroys the life of God we have been given. Every sin is a sin against our inheritance. Added to this every sin, even hidden sins, effect the Body of Christ, for when one part for the body hurts the entire body hurts.

"Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you." The Prodigal recognized the twofold weight of his sin, against God and against his father. We need to do the same. We need to recognize the weight of our sin, against God and against his people. And we need to realize that when we repent our loving God, our Forgiving Father, continually picks us up and celebrates our returning to his home.

And we need to proclaim to the world the great mercy of God. In today's second reading, St. Paul tells the Corinthians that just as we have been reconciled to God through the Blood of Christ, we have been entrusted to bring the ministry of reconciliation to the world. The reading is the same as used on Ash Wednesday:

*We are ambassadors for Christ,
as if God were appealing through us.
We implore you on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled to God.*

We are called ambassadors to represent Jesus Christ. The Forgiving Father does not sit back looking at our waddling in the pig slop and say, "Well he got what he deserved." No he calls for us to come home.

So many people need to hear the message that God forgives them and calls them to his banquet of love. There are so many people who have given up on themselves. You know them. Perhaps they are one of your brothers or sisters, one of your friends or neighbors, one of your children or grandchildren who have decided that they are going to eternal damnation which they have well earned. Their actions seem to worsen every day. They have given up trying to conquer evil in their lives. They have let evil conquer them. They need us, you and me, to say to them, "Do not give up! Be reconciled to God. He has not given up on you. He is standing at the door of

his house, looking across the field, waiting for his prodigal son or daughter to come home. You have hurt yourself in many ways, you have hurt other people, people who loved you, but God has not given up on you. He still loves you. Come home.”

Today is Laetare Sunday. The particular joy of this Sunday is the joy of knowing that reconciliation with God is in our grasp. As ambassadors of Jesus Christ we are called to let others know this. We are called to bring the love of the Forgiving Father to those who need to hear that despite their actions, they are still lovable. We perform the work of God by leading them to be reconciled with God.

We have each been entrusted with a great inheritance. We have each been entrusted with a portion of the Promised Land. We have each been entrusted with the mission of reconciliation. We have each been entrusted with bringing our unique reflection of the Forgiving Father to those who long for someone to say, “Come home. You are forgiven.”