

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Lent, Year C

March 30, 2025

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Joshua 5:9a, 10-12 (The Israelites settle into the Promised Land.)

Responsory: Psalm 34 (Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.)

Second Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 (God has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation.)

Gospel: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 (The parable of the Prodigal Son.)

Today's gospel story is commonly known as, "the Parable of the Prodigal Son." In recent years, many scholars have started calling it, "the Parable of the *Forgiving Father*," focusing more on the character who represents our merciful God. We could also call it, "the Parable of the *Judgmental Older Brother*," thus emphasizing Jesus' motive for telling the story. He was addressing a group of Pharisees and scribes, self-righteous people who insisted on judging the tax collectors and other sinners who drew near to listen to Jesus. They were the older son in the parable, while the tax collectors were the younger son. The genius of the parable is that it shows us how God tries to reconcile *both* types of sinners – those who have wandered far from him, and those whose hearts have grown cold, even as they maintain an outward show of obedience.

Anyone who has ever felt *ashamed* of his sins can probably relate to the younger son, at least to some extent. This young man's behavior was utterly reprehensible, even by modern standards. Just imagine how much worse it would have seemed to Jesus' audience, in first-century Palestine. In that culture, a son simply *did not* treat his father this way. Yet, the young man in the story didn't seem at all repentant at first. It was only after he hit rock bottom and compared his terrible situation to that of his father's workers that he finally came to his senses. He started to realize how badly he had messed up. He had sinned grievously by demanding his share of the estate and turning his back on his family. He recognized that his family owed him *nothing* at this point. But, knowing his father to be a good man, he hoped that he might be allowed to work and live at the estate, and enjoy a decent life on a par with the other workers. Some of us can probably recall feeling something like that as we have approached the confessional, weighed down by guilt and shame. One can be confident of the Lord's mercy, but still unsure that God can really love us *as he did before*. The younger son's experience reminds us of how much we often *underestimate* our Heavenly Father's compassion, especially toward repentant sinners.

In the parable, the father's behavior shows us how *God* approaches those graced encounters with sinners. The father doesn't wait for his wayward son to kneel before him and beg for mercy. He sees him in the distance and *runs out to meet him*. He doesn't even allow the young man to finish his apology before showering him with symbols that demonstrate that his honored place in the family has been restored. Jesus is making it clear that our Heavenly Father is *eager* to reach out to sinners and welcome us home at the very first sign of repentance. We should remember that important truth whenever we fear God's judgment or

doubt God's love, because of the sins that we have committed. *God wants to reconcile with us* even more than we want to reconcile with him.

The character of the older son also has much to teach us. He's the obedient one, the one who follows all the rules and fulfills all of his responsibilities – like many of us faithful Catholics, who try to obey all the commandments and attend Mass every Sunday without fail. But, he's also filled with anger and resentment – like some of us, perhaps. He doesn't want to reconcile with his brother. In fact, he refuses to even acknowledge that this young man *is* his brother. He refers to him as, "your son," as if any relationship that he once had with this person has been destroyed forever. We can easily succumb to our anger in the same way, especially after we have been hurt badly by someone we loved and trusted. We might even resent others for being *too willing to forgive*, as the Pharisees and scribes resented Jesus for welcoming tax collectors to share fellowship with him. However, we must realize that it is *our* anger, *our* resentment, and *our* unwillingness to forgive which prevent all of our old wounds from healing. They continue to fester as long as *we refuse to be reconciled* with those who have hurt us.

The father in the parable shows us how to be whole again. Notice, he's not content to have his younger son back home, as long as his older son remains outside, unwilling to speak to his brother. So, just as the father ran out to meet his younger son in the field, now he goes out to meet his older son, standing defiantly in the darkness. Although the two sons' circumstances, and their sins, are very different, the father's love for them is the same. As he pleads with his older son to come inside, the father reminds him of how much he has *always* loved him. Ironically, the older son may not understand his brother's experience of guilt and shame, because he has never felt the pain of separation from his father. They have always been close, and he knows that all that the father has will eventually be his. Unfortunately, he has allowed that *blessing* to become twisted into a feeling of *entitlement* and *superiority* over his brother. We can easily fall into the same trap, when we judge other people harshly for their sins. There is a great deal of truth in that old saying: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." If we have managed to avoid serious sin, that is *not* a cause for boasting, but cause to *give thanks* to God and to all the people who helped to form our conscience from an early age. We are *blessed* to know God's love and God's law. So, rather than looking down on others, we should seek to *lift them up*. As the parable suggests, God the Father wants *all of us* to be reconciled.

St. Paul refers to this outreach as being an "ambassador for Christ." It's as if God were appealing through us to convey his message of reconciliation to the world. First, of course, we must be reconciled to God ourselves. Paul *implores* us, on behalf of Christ, to do so. But, we should also imitate Paul and be "ministers of reconciliation" for others. This is what we see the father doing in the parable. First, he reconciles with his younger son, and then he tries to bring about reconciliation *between the two brothers*. We, too, should be attentive to both types of reconciliation, for God clearly desires both. Let us seek peace with God *and* with our brothers and sisters, and let *us* be the ones to make the *first move* toward that reconciliation.