

Closing Mass for the Diocesan Retreat

“The Jubilee Year of Mercy: the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy”

March 6, 2016 9:30 a.m. Holy Family Chapel, Nazareth

It's really hard for me to believe that this is Laetare Sunday already---- that means this is the 4th Sunday of Lent and that we're at (or technically past) the half-way point of this 40-day Season of Lent---that means that Easter is only 3 weeks from today---and *that* means there's a lot to do in a very short time! In spite of the fact that this milestone along the Lenten Journey in some ways causes “panic buttons” to be set off for the more “Type-A” personalities among us, this half-way Sunday of Lent---Laetare Sunday----is really a time to do just what the Church calls us to do: to Rejoice!

The reason for “rejoicing” when we're half-way through this Lenten Season isn't just because we can soon be free of the relatively mild rigors of prayer---fasting---self-denial----almsgiving/works of charity that we took on ourselves on Ash Wednesday, but also because we're very close to celebrating what Lent's entire focus *is*, which of course is Jesus' victory over sin and death won for us through His passion, death and resurrection, celebrated during the Sacred Triduum of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday.

But the Church gives us even more reasons to Rejoice this morning through the beautiful Scripture Readings we just heard proclaimed for this Laetare Sunday.

In our First Reading from the Book of Joshua, the entire Israelite community was rejoicing because they had *finally* reached the Promised Land. After wandering through the desert for 40 years, while they turned away from the Lord and then returned to Him countless times during those 40 years, and after relying on God's care for them as demonstrated in their daily portions of manna from heaven as their nourishment----after all that, they finally entered into the Promised Land that truly was a “land flowing with milk and honey”, or at least the “*unleavened cakes*” and “*parched grain*”—the produce of this new land of plenty.

And so we rejoice first of all in one of the signs of God's great Love and Mercy for His people being that He provides for their needs and satisfies all their hungers.

This morning's Psalm Response expressed that same message very beautifully as well as we sang: “*Taste and see the goodness of the Lord*”, as the Psalm gave all the ways that God's goodness is expressed.

But this morning's Gospel passage---the powerful Parable of the Prodigal Son----expresses in such dramatic fashion another very important sign of God's love and mercy.

As I'm sure you know, Jesus told this Parable in response to the complaints that the Pharisees and the Scribes were mounting against Jesus. These very righteous and upstanding citizens of the Jewish community had been watching Jesus for a long time, gathering evidence that they could use against Him and looking for anything that they could use to try to stop Jesus' growing popularity. And so their big accusation was: "*This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" In their mind, that was an awful accusation----something that any self-respecting Jewish follower of the Law would be ashamed of, and could truly be ostracized for. But of course, in Jesus' mind, that was a compliment. That was also a great insight because that is precisely why He did come into the world: to save sinners. And how can sinners be saved unless they know about God's love and mercy?

And so Jesus told three parables, one right after another. The first one was the Parable about the Lost Sheep; the second one was the Parable about the Lost Coin. And the third one, and by far, the most powerful one, was the one we just heard, the one we have come to know as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but that could just as easily be titled the Parable about the Lost Son. The entire 15th Chapter of St. Luke's Gospel is devoted to these Parables about God's love and mercy.

And I guess we could say that there are two fundamental points that all three of these Parables make: 1) the first is that God will do anything, and everything, possible to extend His love and mercy to us human beings; and 2) the second is that Jesus is indeed guilty as charged: He most definitely welcomes sinners and eats with them----and that "them" is us, and all humanity.

Jesus' Parables are masterful----each and every one. But the Parable about the Prodigal Son has to rank right up there at the top. The title of the parable might make it seem that the "son", the younger of the two sons, is the main character in the story. But of course, we all know that the Father is the true focus of Jesus' Parable.

All of us can find ourselves----our own weaknesses and sins----our own sinful tendencies and practices----in the waywardness, recklessness and self-absorption of the *younger son*; and we can certainly do the same when we look at the *older son* and see there our own tendencies

to hold grudges, stubbornly hold on to our grievances, and see the destructive effects of jealousy and envy.

It was the Father----who clearly represents Jesus' Heavenly Father----who never wavered, did everything he could to keep the door open and the light on for the wayward son----who waited and watched for him constantly----until that day of "rejoicing" when He caught sight of his beloved son a long way's off heading back home. Even then, he didn't just wait there for him; no, he ran out to meet him because he couldn't wait any longer. And as soon as the younger son started his pre-rehearsed speech to ask to be allowed just to be a servant in his household, the Father cut him off and called for the robes, rings and sandals----all signs of his son-ship restored, and then ordered the celebration to begin.

The older son too, upon hearing the sounds of the celebration, and learning that his brother was back and the father had thrown a party for him, refused to go in to welcome him home. Once more, it was the Father who came out to meet this older son, to beg him to come in and join in the celebration. But he could not get past his resentment and anger.

We never hear anything more about what happened in that situation. Did the younger son stay in control of his senses and continue being a good, reconciled son? Did the older son ever get over his resentments? Did the entire family ever get reunited? We don't know. What we do know is that the Father's Love and Mercy is what was most important, and the reason for rejoicing was because *one who was dead had come back to life; one who was lost had been found.*

Of course, teaches by Parables so that we can be motivated and inspired----moved and encouraged----to figure out what happens in our own lives. What moves us----encourages us----empowers us to turn away from our own waywardness and selfishness, or our own resentments and anger----is coming to realize that the our Father God watches out for us----is willing and anxious to forgive us----comes out time after time to beg us to return to the household and to be reconciled with Him and with our brothers and sisters in the human family. We don't know what the prodigal son did, nor what the elder son did; what we do know is what we will do----what changes we will make---in our own lives. We definitely need to open ourselves to receive God's love and mercy. But, having been recipients of that great gift, we ALSO need to be moved, in turn, to give love and mercy to those others in our lives who need it from us.

For those who have been on retreat here these last two days, I know that you've been pondering about and reflecting on that very essential characteristic of God's very Person---- God's merciful love for His people. And you've also been reflecting on the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy. They, of course, are so much more than acts of kindness and charity to those in need; the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy are the best way that we can express to God how grateful we are to Him for the mercy He shows to us by, in turn, showing that same love and mercy to the people we encounter in our lives.

God extends mercy to us so that our relationship with Him, broken by our sins, may be restored. It is for that very reason why we extend mercy to others so that our relationships with one another can also be made new.

It's all about reconciliation. And that's exactly what St. Paul told us so clearly in our Second Reading this morning: "*We implore you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God!*" It is absolutely true, as St. Paul also told us, that "*whoever is in Christ is a new creation....(which means that)...we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us!*" It was to accomplish reconciliation that Jesus came into the world----to "welcome sinners and eat with them"---to *bring to life those who were dead* in sin, and to *find those who were lost* and bring them home. Likewise, for those of us who have been reconciled in Christ, we must truly be Christ's ambassadors to go forth and reconcile as much of the world as we can.

That is the best reason of all for us to rejoice----not because Lent is more than half way over, but because of God's love and mercy which we celebrate here in God's Life-giving Word, and in the Saving Body and Blood of Christ as our food and drink for the remainder of our journey of faith on our way to the Promised Land.

God bless you, now and always!

Faithfully yours in Christ, Bishop Paul J. Bradley