

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

Learn to love the one who sins differently from the way I sin.

Saints have a past and sinners have a future. And in our Parable of the Prodigal Son tonight the Prodigal Son has a past. But what a great person he becomes as he returns to his father asking for mercy. Saints have a past and sinners have a future. We really don't have an idea of how great God's mercy is.

Suppose for a minute, that you have just died and gone to heaven. That possibility sounds great, after all our lives are supposed to be lived in such manner that we do get there. That is what our faith tells us. Yes, heaven and eternal reward with God is our reward for living faithfully. And we think we did live that way most of the time. But, much to your surprise, your dismay, the first people you run into are Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. How did they get here you wonder even aloud! How could God do this to men who lived so faithlessly? How could God make them equal to me? Surely they could not have repented. Really, how would you feel if they made it to heaven along with you?

And, they may have made it, for we do not know what sort of repentance, what prodigal return on each of their parts might have happened in their dying moments. Would you want to be in heaven with them? Isn't that possibility presented in today's scriptures? But, but... we might object to God, only to finally have to realize that God is so good and so loving and so forgiving that this is possible.

Today's readings tell us about that good God, that forgiving God, who would choose to not destroy Moses' followers for adoring a golden calf. It is a God who would allow a persecutor like Paul not only to repent, but to become the one who would bring Christianity from being a small sect within Jewish circles to being a Christianity which truly welcomed all sorts of people. It is the same God who would allow Dorothy Day to move from her way of life to the way we recognize as good.

If we look at the Gospel parable we find the story of a son who basically says you are dead, Father, so give me my share of the inheritance. Yes, to demand ones share while ones father was still alive was tantamount to saying that to me you are dead. It says, God may have left you alive, father, but I want you out of the way. I want to do my own thing with everything that is mine.

Only when he finds himself lower than a pig does the son awaken and realize a need to come and ask forgiveness. Something in his very gut says I am wrong. I need forgiveness. I need to know I am loved, even if my status with my father cannot be regained.

So, he comes home, his father loves him into new life. And along comes his older brother. This brother is proud that he has never strayed like his younger brother. He has never tried to act like his father did not matter. He sees himself as having never sinned like his brother has. Yet, he seems to have followed the rules and to have done all of the necessary actions, but without loving the one for whom he is doing them. He cannot see that he was loved all along. And he cannot let himself love someone who has sinned in a manner different from his own way of sinning. In fact the faithful brother cannot see that following the rules without a sense of living lovingly is a sin.

The Gospel explains in simple middle eastern terms just how much God desires to save all, how God truly finds that no one is expendable, not one lost sheep, not one lost part of a married woman's identity, not the son who wandered off to the wilderness to find his way, not the son who lost his way at in the wilderness of his own bitterness while being loved at home. And yet, we find Jesus having to explain to the Pharisees exactly the fact that it is those who have sinned, that God comes to save. We find Jesus having to explain that all have sinned and all are to be saved.

The story of the brothers and the loving nature of God should hit close to home for every one of us. We are likely both brothers at different times. There are times when we walk away from the Father, walk away from life in Jesus, going our own way. Some wander from family or the Church for a long time before finding they are missing being loved. There are times when we live the rules of family or of Church without a sense of life in them, perhaps even to the point of being scrupulous. We sometimes do it with a great sense of pride.

Which way is worse? The elder brother's way seems to say I love God I love the Church because I do everything right. The younger brother says I don't need God or family, but after a while of wandering he comes to recognize that he has left love behind and needs it badly.

As long as either can be prodigal, either can meet that shameless ever giving father who comes running to meet us and welcome us home, showering us with love. The example of the father is there for us to grow into as the way we treat one another.

So, for what shall we pray in today's Eucharist? I think two graces: the grace to love the other even if he or she sins differently from me; and the grace to know enough to come running to the forgiving God who welcomes us in either case.

And our action out of this Eucharist, what might it be? Perhaps it is to learn to love the one who sins differently from the way I sin.

Let us conclude with a prayer :-

"Father, I know that I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward you. Please forgive me, and help me avoid sinning again. I believe that your son, Jesus Christ died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead, is alive, and hears my prayer. I invite Jesus to become the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me obey You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen."