

Sunday of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:)
BB29.3 Spring 2017 from Homily 2/12/17
Most Recent Revision: 1/28/18
(need hard copy for some missing lines)

“It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found” (Lk. 15:32). It is hard to imagine how the older brother could not be delighted to see his younger brother again, but, in a way, we know very well his condition. Among the greatest tragedies of the human condition is this inability to rejoice in other people’s success. When good things happen to another person—maybe they earned it maybe they did not earn it—we compare ourselves to them, even in the secular realm. We have a kind of envy for what other people have: maybe a large house or a good job; maybe advancement in their work; maybe a couple who are able to have children, but we are not; maybe a friend of ours who got married, and we would like to be married and are not. Maybe we envy somebody who is very clever with their words and quick at responding to situations in a verbal context; or who is very smart; or somebody who is beautiful or handsome. We see

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“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself

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other people succeed in various ways in life, and it is hard for us to rejoice with them. We want what they have. We feel sort of tortured in our own spirits, eaten away from the inside out, because of this comparison in which we are not able to be free to simply delight in their good fortune. Moreover, the most insidious form of this occurs when it is in the context of the Church, in the context of our spiritual lives, as in the case of the Gospel reading today. We do this often. We visit another parish, and we subconsciously calculate in our mind our parish compared to their parish, or our priest compared to their priest. We compare different jurisdictions and different practices in the Church. We think, ‘How can that person think that he or she can come to communion? Who does he or she think they are?’ We do these things. We see somebody who was made a priest, and we would like to be a priest; or somebody who is the choir director, and we would like to be the choir director. We cannot really be free to rejoice in the ministry that God has given that other person.

The elder son in the parable today is totally imprisoned, totally in bondage to this way of life. As I mentioned last week in the parable of the Publican and Pharisee, the elder son, like the Pharisee, can see with 20/20 vision the sins of his younger brother; but he cannot see any of his

own sins. He is totally blind to his own sins, yet he has perfect vision regarding the sins of his brother. On the other hand, he has 20/20 vision regarding his good deeds. "I've never left you," he says to his Father, "Lo, these many years I have been serving you, I never transgressed your commandments at any time..." (Lk. 15:29). He is very clear about his good deeds, but he cannot seem to find anything good about his brother, not even his brother's repentance or his humility to turn and come back.

This Gospel reading occurs in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The chapter begins with an introduction to three parables. The introduction is as follows: the tax-collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus, and the Scribes and the Pharisees complained that Jesus would spend time with them. So Jesus says: "For the Son of Man came to save that which was lost" (Matt. 18:11), and then He tells three parables; you are familiar with them all. The first one is about a shepherd who has a hundred sheep and loses one of them; he leaves the ninety-nine and goes out to find the one. He seeks and saves the lost. The second parable is of a woman who has seven gold coins and loses one of them; she stops everything, sweeps the whole house, and cleans everything until she finds that one gold coin. She seeks it; everything goes on hold until she can find that coin. In both cases, when the lost item is found, the sheep or the gold coin, our Lord says then they invite all their friends over and have a party; 'I have found it. I have found what was lost.' In the third parable that of the Prodigal Son, the father goes out to meet the prodigal son, but this son is

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already returning. He also goes out to get the older son, the older son who will not return, who will not come in: "For the Son of Man came to save that which was lost" (Matt. 18:11), a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost older brother who will not come in and rejoice.

The Scribes and the Pharisees know very well that the older brother represents them. They are the ones who can see other people's sins with such clarity but do not notice their own. They are the ones who obey every law, every command, who keep the law with great strictness, but they will not come in to the banquet when another has repented and come back into the Kingdom. So our Lord, in the person of the father of this parable, goes out to them. It is very important that we see that He goes out to everyone. He is seeking and saving each and every one of us, even when we have this callous indifference to the spiritual joys of other people. He is still coming and seeking us, longing for us to return to the feast; He is longing for us to repent and not to rely on our own good efforts, our confident assurance of our own piety, church attendance, or whatever it might be.

So we have as the image of repentance the prodigal son, the son who took his share of the inheritance and left the country and wasted it all. There are three parts to his repentance that

really stand out. The first thing it says is that he came to himself. He had been running from himself. He was not just running from his father or from the household; he was running from himself. Notice that the older brother was also running from himself. He was totally outside of himself, not able to be still enough to see what was really going on in his inner life: the bitterness, the resentment that had grown up in him, that was taking root and taking over his inner life because of his attitude toward his younger brother. The older brother could not come to himself; he could not face himself. The first thing that the younger brother does in his repentance is stop running.

We too are on the run; we run in all different kinds of ways. We would be mistaken to say, ‘Well, I haven’t taken half the inheritance and run away yet.’ But we run to the refrigerator, or we run to the computer. We run to busy-ness. We like to be busy because then we do not have to face ourselves. All the while we are running, like the elder brother who was running from himself in the midst of a normal, good, productive life in his father’s household. He was running, keeping himself busy. He was busy being obedient, busy with good things; all the while letting bitterness and anger grow in him.

And so we have to take stock of our lives and ask ourselves, ‘Am I running? What are my comfort activities that allow me to stay away from really noticing what is going on inside of me? Where am I envious of other people? Where am I letting bitterness grow in me? Where am I upset that I haven’t been acknowledged for something that I did?’ There is no repentance without first stopping and coming to ourselves. When we offer to God some image of ourselves, some shell, some ideal of ourselves, we do not offer ourselves. We offer someone else, the person we wish we were, but we do not offer ourselves. The Pharisees and the elder brother offered someone other than themselves, and that is the one offering that God cannot take. God cannot receive our offering unless we offer ourselves for who we truly are— not pretending in any way to be different, not pretending in any way to be good or pious or righteous— just who we are. So first we must come to ourselves.

The second thing the younger son does is he remembers. He remembers what life was like in his father’s house: “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger” (Lk. 15:17). God has placed in each and every one of us an awareness of Him. It is His image that He created us in; it is the Kingdom of God that is within us. But so often we search for change and transformation in our lives by looking at all different kinds of things outside of us. We do this in different ways: by re-doubling our efforts to go on a diet, to be in an exercise program, to learn mindfulness techniques. We commit ourselves to reading schedules, or becoming smarter, or learning this, or learning that. Insofar as we are looking at things outside ourselves, we will never be able to remember where we came from, what our true origin is. What the younger son remembers is his source, his origin, to Whom he belongs. In the

hymnography of the Triodion season we sing: “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept..” (Ps. 136:1). Israel has been taken captive, they are in Babylon, sitting by the streams of Babylon, and they are weeping. Why are they weeping? The psalmist says: “when we remembered Zion” (Ibid.). That is, ‘When we remembered our home.’

We do not belong in captivity. We do not belong eating with the pigs. We do not belong out in the field in our father’s house letting bitterness grow in our hearts. We do not belong in any sort of bondage whatsoever. We belong in the freedom of our father’s house, in Sion, in the Kingdom of God; and we come to experience this by simple memory, by looking inside. Memories are inside of us. They are things we already have; they have been planted in us. So we have to stop our running, and we have to look inside for those memories. They may be tangible memories that we have, if we grew up in the Church: a memory of the smell of incense, or a hierarchical Liturgy when we were a little child, and how overwhelmingly amazing it seemed. But in the end the memories will simply be this awareness that we yearn to be completed by Christ, that we have within us this place that yearns for Christ. St. Augustine says, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in You, O Lord.”

So the first step is to stop running, and to come to ourselves. The second is to look inside of ourselves for these memories, not memories of our sins, but memories of the presence of God, of being created by Him, of having His image imprinted on us, that “The Kingdom of God is within you” (Lk. 17:21), says the Lord, that we have this yearning and longing to be in His presence, to be back in paradise, to return to Sion. And then the third is very simple ‘I have to go back. I have to go back to the Father and tell Him my sins. I simply have to go to confession.’ It is really that simple: ‘I have to return and go to confession.’ His words are very clear, he does not justify himself; he has no excuses; he does not even say, ‘Oh, I was young and impetuous, and foolish.’ He does not make any excuses whatsoever. He says, “I have sinned. Against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants” (Lk. 15:18-19). It is hard to return to God. It is one thing to come to ourselves; it is another thing to look inside; and it is a third thing to come and openly confess, in the presence of God, before a priest, our sins. This final step keeps us from deceiving ourselves; it keeps us from this me-and-Jesus mentality. It keeps us from thinking, ‘I do not need anybody else. I do not need the church.’ Instead we are to come back and openly, before another person, confess our sins without any explanation, without any excuse, without blaming any other person.

So these three steps are the medicine. They were available to the elder brother also, and they are available to each and every one of us. It is the time in which we focus on this life of repentance, from now on. ■