

Of all the many parables Jesus told, this is probably the best one because it reveals so much about the heart of God. In fact, we call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but it is probably misnamed. It should be called the Parable of the Father's Love and Mercy because this story is more about the father than it is the son. It is meant to reveal to us how God the Father loves us and it also shows us some things about ourselves.

The first thing I want to point out about this story is how incredibly insulting the son was to the father in his request. "Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me." Of course, he is asking for his inheritance which should only come to him after his father is passed. So what he is really saying is "I wish you were dead so that I could get my share of the inheritance. But since you're not dead yet, I'll just go ahead and ask for it now." Horrendous, a horrendous sin against the Father.

Notice in this line how self-focused it is: "Give me the share... that should come to me." So, we see here the nature of sin. "Me, my, mine, I want" to the exclusion of what is good and right and to the exclusion of love.

We see that the father goes ahead and accedes to the son's request. In the parable, the father respects the son's freedom, and in this we see a reflection of God. God respects our freedom. He doesn't want us just to be His little puppets. He wants us to choose what is good freely, to choose to love Him freely.

But the risk is that we will abuse that freedom and choose what is evil. This explains why there is evil in the world, because we choose it, and we have chosen it, and the world is infected by these choices.

Then in the parable it says that the son went off to a "distant country." But the Greek is "Kora macra." "Macra" means "big" and "Kora" means "empty", the big empty space, that's where the young son went.

So again, this tells us something about sin. Here the son has all this money and he is setting out completely unfettered, it seems, with endless possibilities of self-fulfillment. How exciting! But what he really is heading for is the big empty space where there is no love, no true life. In the end only starvation and pig slop. Sin promises so much, so much excitement, self-fulfillment, happiness. But it's an illusion, it's nothing but big emptiness and pig slop. We can see that this dynamic is true for every sin, big or little, from the adulterous relationship to the little word of gossip that comes out of our mouth. So much seeming promise, so much emptiness on the other end.

The son in the parable, eventually recognizes this emptiness, "comes to his senses" and returns to the father, to the true life and love that the father offers. This is the heart of this parable, as a sinful son comes back to the father, humbled, looking to be only a slave in his father's household, the father runs to him, embraces him, puts a ring on his finger and a robe around him.

Even before this, we see what the father is doing. In the parable it says, "While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him." So all the time the son was wandering around in

the “Kora macra”, the big empty space, the father was waiting for him, looking for him, waiting, expecting. Humiliation of the father.

You see, that is our God. Don’t think of God as someone who is deeply offended by our sin. God is offended by our sin, but not in some personal, psychological way like we might get offended with each other. “Oh, I’m so offended by what you said to me.” When we say that God is offended by our sin, it doesn’t mean like this. It means that God hates our sin because it takes us away from loving Him, which is our very life. He is offended by our sin because of His great love for us.

God isn’t like Marie Barone. Do you know who Marie Barone is? The narcissistic passive-aggressive mother/mother-in-law character from “Everybody Loves Raymond”, who is irrationally offended at perceived slights and only shows love and affection on her terms.

Rather, like the father in the parable, God’s love is constant, never failing, waiting for us to return to Him, to come to our senses. To restore us to the life and love that we can only find in Him.

Finally, turning to the older son in the parable, we see someone who is externally faithful, but internally also does not understand the father’s love. The key word that he uses is “slave” – “All these years I slaved for you.” You see, God doesn’t want us just to be obedient to Him, He wants to be in a deep relationship of love and communion with us.

Again look at the father in the parable, is he merely a harsh law-giver who demands our obedience lest he strike us down? No, He is a loving father who offers us life, light, and love with Him and He searches for us to return when we’ve lost our way.

This is what Jesus is revealing to us today about the love of the Father.

**Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, 2016.**