

This parable has been named the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but as I have pointed out before, the parable is really not about the son. It’s about the father, and the tremendous love and mercy that the Father has.

Of course, Jesus is meaning to point out through this parable the tremendous love that the father has for us, His gracious mercy toward us – a love which is extravagant. Sometimes I think we don’t really believe this. We don’t believe that God could be that merciful toward us – we believe that God only begrudgingly gives us His mercy, like we have in our minds that God is saying to us “You did that AGAIN. How could you? After all the times that I’ve forgiven you, you’ve done it AGAIN?”

Now look in this parable. Is there anything in this parable that would give us that idea about God? Nothing. In fact, just the opposite.

When the son finally returns home,

“His Father caught sight of him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him... his father ordered his servants, ‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. then let us celebrate with a feast because this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’”

This is not a God who begrudges mercy. God our Father joyously forgives us and there is no sin so grievous which is beyond His desire to forgive.

I read an incredible story the other day about this. It is the story of one of the commandants of the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II. His name was Rudolf Höss. During his time at Auschwitz as commandant, 2.5 million prisoners were killed in 3 years. Another half-million died from disease and starvation. After his tenure at Auschwitz, he was responsible for the execution of another 400,000 Hungarian Jews. Höss was considered an “animal.”

There is a religious sister from Poland touring the United States right now telling this story. One day, sister relates, they arrested a community of Jesuit priests. Only the superior, Father John, was not at home. When he came home, he was in such distress that his brothers had been taken to Auschwitz that he snuck into the camp. He was caught and taken to Höss, the commandant. To the surprise of everyone, Höss let the Jesuit go. After the end of the war, Höss was captured, tried and convicted of crimes against humanity. He was sentenced to death and was to be executed in Auschwitz, the very place he was responsible for. Höss went into great fear, not of death but of prison. He was totally convinced that the Polish guards would take revenge on him and he would be tortured the whole time in prison.

The sister said this, “How great was his surprise when the guards – men whose wives, daughters, and sons were killed in Auschwitz, treated him well. He couldn’t understand.” That was the moment of his conversion. “They treated him mercifully. Mercy is the love we know we do not deserve. He didn’t deserve their forgiveness, their goodness, their gentleness. And he received all that.”

Höss was a cradle Catholic who had abandoned the faith in his youth. Before he was executed, he asked for a priest. The guards looked for a priest, but they had a hard time finding a priest who was willing to hear his confession, there was still so much anger and pain about what Höss had done. Höss begged the guards to find that Jesuit, Father John, who he had let go. The priest came and heard his confession.

“It lasted and lasted and lasted,” the sister said, “and then he gave him absolution.”

“Your sins are forgiven, Rudolf Höss, your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.”

The next day Father John went to the prison again to give Höss the Eucharist before he was to die. One of the guards said that it was one of the most beautiful moments of his life seeing that “animal” kneeling, with tears in his eyes, looking like a little boy and receiving Holy Communion, receiving Jesus with his heart. Unimaginable mercy.”

When we hear this story, maybe we bristle a bit. “This one truly does not deserve God’s mercy. He deserves to rot in Hell.” Yeah, that’s right, he did. But that is what God’s mercy is, undeserved love, and on an unfathomable scale. If we say, still, that Höss should not have received that mercy, then we are saying that the cross of Jesus doesn’t mean anything. And if we think the same even about our own sins, then we reject the love of the Father, a love which is extravagant and even to each one of us personally, no matter what we have done, knows no boundaries.

Given by Father Mark Gurtner at Our Lady of Good Hope Catholic Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on the 4th Sunday of Lent, 2016.