

Homily for Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 11th, 2022

By Deacon Richard Hay

In today's readings, we hear a great message of mercy. The mercy of God when he hears Moses and chooses not to punish the Israelite people due to their disobedience; the mercy in the responsorial psalm about how God's compassion wipes away our offenses; the merciful treatment Paul mentions in the second reading despite his history as a blasphemer and persecutor; then in the gospel, the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin. In all of them much rejoicing as one sinner repents.

Then we hear a wonderful story of mercy and forgiveness in the parable of the Prodigal Son. This is a powerful story to consider in our own lives as well.

Pope St. John Paul II wrote about the message of this parable by saying that God the Father is rich in mercy and is always ready to forgive and that this forgiveness is pure gift on the part of the Father. In other words, there is nothing for us to do on our part to earn it – it is freely given. For us, however, it is a little more challenging to offer that same

level of forgiveness out of our human nature – not impossible – but likely requiring much prayer, reflection and yes, mercy.

Because of our human nature and imperfections, for us total forgiveness is a tough proposition. The father in the parable, who represents God the Father, shows us the path towards total and uncompromising forgiveness. Untold families have experienced the heartbreak of troubled relationships and a break in the trust between us as parents, brothers, sisters, and other members of our family. No matter the cause of that break, forgiveness is hard. Our first response is not to break out jewelry, fresh clothes, and then throw a big party when that person who hurt us walks back into our lives.

We get a sense of how hard forgiveness is towards the end of the parable when the older brother hears the celebration while he is out in the fields working. He must ask one of the servants what is happening and that is when he learns that his younger brother has returned. He refuses to go into the party because he is angry about what is happening. Who among us wouldn't also be upset in a similar situation?

The father comes out to the older son and tries to explain – in fact the gospel says he “pleaded” with him to come in and celebrate and

rejoice that his younger brother, who was thought dead, has now returned.

However, the parable ends right there.

We never hear whether the older brother listened to his father and subsequently entered the house to celebrate his younger brother's return or if he remained angry. Maybe we're not meant to know what happened at this point.

However, we may wonder if the older brother's reaction has been addressed. Would a dialog between the two brothers begin if the younger one had gone outside himself to apologize and ask for forgiveness from his brother in the same humble way he sought that forgiveness from his father? That probably would have gone a long way towards mending those broken fences between them. In our own lives, being the first to apologize and ask for forgiveness from someone we have hurt is hard.

Ever wonder how the next couple of days might have gone after the younger sons return? Tensions were probably high around the house and the farm. However, there is some hope through this parable that the example of the fathers loving forgiveness would eventually prompt the

younger brother to seek forgiveness directly from his older brother and then for the older brother to forgive his younger sibling.

We should all be able to see our own human reactions in the response of the older brother with his anger and feelings of resentment. If we're honest with ourselves, if something like this happens in our lives, our first response is not to throw open our arms and rejoice. Forgiveness is also not the first thought to cross our minds either. The example for us to take away from today's gospel, is to try and emulate the complete and unconditional love and forgiveness offered by the father.

Will we be successful 100% of the time when we try to respond in the same way? It would be challenging to land that approach all the time, but the potential exists to make a good effort to be forgiving and continue to work our way forward from there and rejoice in our efforts.

Rejoice as the father did on his younger son's return. Did you catch that line in scripture where it says that the father caught sight of the younger son from afar off? That means he was watching for the younger son to return. The father, our God, is always watching for us to come back to him from our sinfulness and He will be ready to rejoice and greet us with open arms.

We receive mercy and grace from within the sacrament of reconciliation which offers us an opportunity for conversion and repentance. It allows us to receive God's loving gift of grace. Remember the joyful celebrations that we heard about in the two previous parables about the lost sheep and the widow's lost coin? They both rejoiced in finding what was lost because it represents the rejoicing among the angels of God in heaven over the one sinner who repents.

So, our challenge as we go forth from this place, this eucharistic celebration, is to rejoice in the Lord's merciful forgiveness for us in our weakness. We should then endeavor to take that mercy and forgiveness from God and reach out to someone in our lives who we might be estranged from and offer forgiveness and peace like the Father offers us in our sinfulness.

When that happens, let us also offer a prayer of thanks to God for his gracious mercy and forgiveness that allows us to rejoice in his gifts of grace.