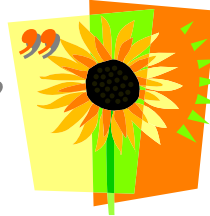




THE PRODIGAL SON – Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 34:2-7; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3,11-32

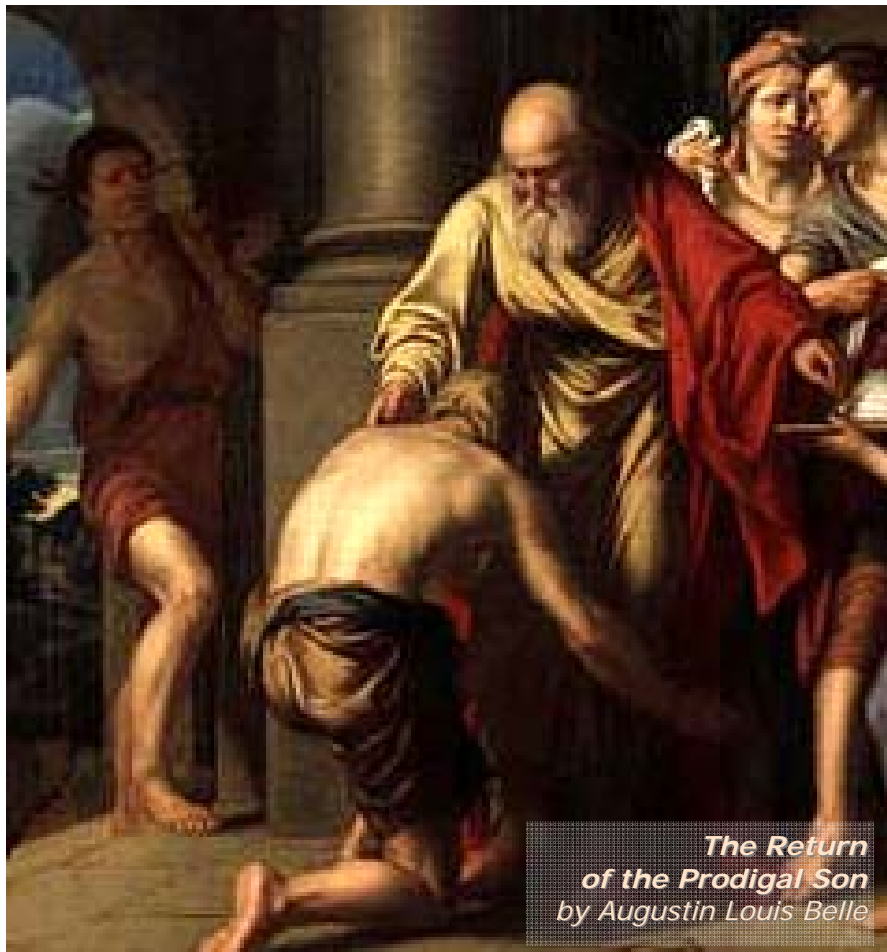
“He was lost, and now has been found...”



Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So to them Jesus addressed this parable: “A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, ‘Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he

longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him,

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.” So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But 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.’ Then the celebration began. Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, ‘Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came



The Return of the Prodigal Son
by Augustin Louis Belle



out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, ‘Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.’ He said to him, ‘My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’”

REFLECTION:

After miraculously crossing the Jordan, the children of Israel renewed their covenant with the Lord and celebrated their first Passover in the Promised Land.

And then it happened: The manna stopped. The miraculous provision that had sustained them for forty years in the desert came to a halt, and the people had to learn how to live off the bounty of the land of Canaan instead. It must have felt odd to wake up that morning and not see the manna there, ready to be eaten. Now they had to work for their food.

Sometimes we can become upset about changes that come into our lives. We may not feel God’s presence in prayer the same way we did when we were just beginning to get to know him. Perhaps we move to a new parish where small differences make the liturgy feel strange to us. We get out of school, or we retire from work, or we are released from prison, and we miss the structure of a consistent daily schedule. We feel

cut adrift, and we don’t know where to find God. If you’re going through a season of change now, remember that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

He still cares for you. Of course you should cherish the ways he met your needs in the past. But you should also be open to what he wants to do with you today. If the manna seems to have dried up, look around to find the milk and honey. Perhaps for a time you will hear his voice more clearly at Mass than in your private devotions. Instead of longing for your previous pastor, look closely for the refreshing ways your new pastor leads and serves.

Change isn’t always easy. But God always goes before you into every new situation. All you have to do is seek his presence, and you will discover new and exciting ways to meet him.

“Father, you generously provide for all my needs. You know me through and through. Please help me to embrace the new ways you want to provide for me today.”

Mon, March 15

Isaiah 65:17-21; Psalm 30:2,4-6,11-13; John 4:43-54

This was the second sign Jesus did when he came to Galilee from Judea. (John 4:54) A nod. A sore throat. A red sky at night. It’s an odd assortment, and yet all these things share something in common: They are signs telling us something beyond themselves.

In John’s Gospel, a “sign” means a wondrous deed of Jesus and it points to realities far weightier than tomorrow’s

weather or the onset of a cold. John could have called these actions “miracles,” but he wanted to highlight their greater purpose. Not only were they meant to reveal Jesus’ mission and identity, they were meant to call forth faith in those who saw them.

This call to faith is evident in the structure of John’s Gospel, which falls into two major sections: the “Book of Signs” (John 1:19–12:50) and the “Book of Glory” (13:1–20:31), where the signs are fulfilled. The “Signs” section gives special attention to seven of Jesus’ miracles. In today’s Gospel (sign number two), he heals a boy by simply speaking a word, without even having to set eyes on him. The other signs include two more healings (a man who couldn’t walk and a man born blind—5:1-15; 9:1-41), miracles of wine and bread (2:1-11; 6:1-15), and a demonstration of Jesus’ power over the forces of nature (6:16-21). This section culminates in the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1-57). Could the message be any clearer? Jesus is the Word of Life, Living Water, Bread of life, Light of the World, Lord of Creation, Lord of Life!

The Book of Glory makes all this explicit. There, in the greatest sign of all, the One we remember in every Sign of the Cross, Jesus gives his life for us. Lifted up for all to see, he is revealed as Lord and God.

In John’s Gospel, we see Jesus working to reveal the Father to ordinary people with ordinary hopes and needs. This Jesus is among us today, still working signs, large and small, to get our attention and draw us to himself. What signs has he given you? How

is he inviting you to believe in him? And how will you respond? **“Jesus, you reveal yourself to me in so many ways. Help me to recognize the signs of your love and presence in my life. I do believe! Help me to love and follow you, and lead me into your glory.”**

Tues, March 16

Ezekiel 47:1-9,12; Psalm 46:2-3,5-6,8-9; John 5:1-16

The prophet Ezekiel paints a picture of a beautiful stream that originates in the Temple and grows deeper and wider as it flows outward.

It begins as an ankle-deep trickle but becomes a river that can only be crossed by swimming. It flows out over the whole land, bringing and sustaining life wherever it goes. It even turns the salty, toxic waters of the Dead Sea into a source of refreshment and promise!

Guess what? We the baptized have been plunged into that very stream. God’s life now flows in us, ready to carry us along.

Where are you in the stream?

Ankle deep? In over your head? Somewhere in between? No matter! Wherever you are, God is inviting you to go deeper. Don’t be afraid to wade or jump in, splash around, and get wet. Unlike earthly streams that we have managed to pollute, this stream washes clean everyone who enters it. It can never be sullied, no matter how great the sins we bring into it. That’s because it is the river of God’s mercy.

Where is the water of God’s life touching you today? Are tears of grief, repentance, or rejoicing welling up in you?

Perhaps God is inviting you to be scrubbed, cleansed, and renewed by the sacraments, especially Confession. Maybe you're soaking in the soothing waters of God's presence, letting the moisture sink into your parched soul. Maybe you've jumped in over your head, and it feels as if you're floundering. (If so, just relax and let the Spirit carry you.)

The next time you come to church, be sure to pause by the font of holy water. If your church keeps it dry during Lent, take time to reflect on your thirst for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit at Easter. If it is filled, pay extra attention as you sign yourself with the cross. On your way out of church, as well, remember that Ezekiel's stream grows deeper and stronger and more life giving as it leaves the place of worship and flows out into the world God created and loves. That stream is now carrying you, empowering you to be an agent of healing and new life to everyone around you.

"Holy Spirit, I thirst for you. Let the water of your new life flow into me. Let your love flow out through me to renew the world."

tion, not mercy. Isn't that wondrous? His love for us doesn't change based on our behavior. No, he loves us simply because he made us and has bound himself to us eternally.

Think, too, about how different our love is when compared to God's love. We can be happy one minute and angry the next. We love people more when they are kind to us, and we are indifferent to those who disregard us. And even with those we do love, there are some days when it is easier to love and some when it is harder. God's love is never subject to these kinds of ups and downs. He loves us when we fall on our faces. He loves us when we are not faithful to his commands. Quite frankly, he loves us when we are not very lovable!

This is not to say God doesn't care about justice. The Israelites had tough times, but God never abandoned them. Even when he had to chastise them and let them face the consequences of their sins, he never gave up on them. He was always ready to take them back and start all over again. In some

instances, God even used their misfortune to teach and purify them all the more. Why is God's love so constant? Well, because he is God, of course. But also because he sees a much bigger picture than we do. God never takes his eyes off his goal for us: to make us into vessels of honor, fit to be filled with his own divine life.

He can be patient with us because he has all eternity to work with us. He will never give up on his people!

"Father, My idea of love can be so limited, so please break through the boundaries I have set up. I want nothing more, Father, than to be filled with your life."

Thurs, March 18

Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 106:19-23; John 5:31-47

If you were on trial, wouldn't you want to have solid evidence in your favor?

Of course you would! Jesus, who is challenged here by the Jewish authorities, calls on the best possible witnesses to show that he is acting on God's behalf. There is the

testimony of John the Baptist, the testimony of his own teaching and miracles, and Scripture, whose every word testifies to him (John 5:39). Yet for all that, the religious leaders still won't accept him. What more can Jesus do to convince them?

The answer, as we already know, is the most convincing proof Jesus can give: his own life, offered as a sacrifice. It's the testimony of divine love, which fulfills all the laws that the Jews had honored and sought to fulfill for centuries.

In the Eucharist, we have absolute proof of Jesus' commitment to us. But sometimes we still need to be convinced, especially when trials chip away at our hope. We need to remind ourselves that at every Communion, we receive the completion of all Jesus did and taught. The readings can give us Jesus' words and reveal his life to us. The homily can explain his words and open our minds to his truth. During the prayers of the liturgy, we can ask him to intercede for us. But at Communion, we receive him. What would you say to Jesus if you knew he was closer

Wed, March 17

Isaiah 49:8-15; Psalm 145:8-9, 13-14, 17-18; John 5:17-30

Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you. (Isaiah 49:15)

What a moving image of God and his love for us! Our God will never, ever forsake us.

This would be amazing enough on its own, but let's remember who we are: sinners who deserve condemna-

HOUSEHOLD SERVANT

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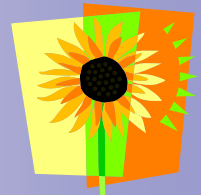
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than your next breath? Well, that's how close he is during Communion. He knows all your hopes and dreams. He knows all your challenges, too. And he wants to have a role to play in all of them. But most of all, he wants to convince you that his love is more real than anything else in this world. So take the time after Communion to sit with him. Try to feel his presence in you, just as you can feel the love of your closest friend. Tell him what's on your heart, but also make sure you listen to what's on his heart. Let his presence dispel your anxieties and give you a new vision for your life.

Let him bear testimony to himself—right there in your heart!

“Lord, thank you for the awesome mystery of your presence in the Eucharist. May I never forget the price you paid for me and the love you are always ready to share with me!”

St. Joseph Friday, Mar 19

Romans 4:13,16-18,22; 2 Samuel 7:4-5,12-14,16; Psalm 89:2-5,27,29; Matthew 1:16,18-21,24

In the Book of Genesis, there is a touching scene where God takes Abraham outside on a starry night. You can almost picture the Father with his arm around the perplexed man, telling him: “Look up at the sky, and count the stars, if you can. Just so ... shall your descendants be.” It must have been quite a stretch for Abraham to believe this. Years had passed since God's first promise of descendants, but he and Sarah remained childless. And yet, Abraham “put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness” (Genesis 15:5,6).

Many centuries later, God made a night visit to one of Abraham's descendants, who was also perplexed. What he promised Joseph was even harder to believe: Mary's child had been conceived “through the holy Spirit” and would “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20,21). Did Joseph think of Abraham as he pondered all this? Since he was a devout Jew who knew the Scriptures and would have looked to Abraham as a model, it seems quite possible.

He put his faith in God and then showed it over and over by his ready obedience. Joseph knew that his relationship with God rested on the bedrock of grace as a gift to be received by faith. And so, like Abraham, “he believed, hoping against hope ... and was fully convinced that what [God] had promised he was also able to do” (Romans 4:18,21). By accepting the mystery of God's plan for his life, Joseph advanced God's saving plan for us all. In union with Mary's fiat, Joseph's “yes” changed the world! God has a plan for your life, too. It may seem humble and insignificant compared to Joseph's, but don't be fooled: Your response of faith really matters. You don't know where your “yes” might lead and how God might use it. Ask Joseph to help you receive the grace your Father wants to give you. Then, like Joseph, go out in faith to be a “doer of the word.”

“Father, I believe your promises. Thank you for the gift of your Son and for the intercession of so many ancestors in faith. Holy Spirit, help my unbelief! I want to accept and act on all the grace you have for me.”

Sat, March 20

Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 7:2-3,9-12; John 7:40-53

Imagine the scene: a large crowd in Jerusalem, packing the streets, for the Festival of Tabernacles. The people have heard of this man, Jesus, who teaches with authority and cures the sick. Then they hear him speaking and are spellbound. Surely this man is a prophet—or maybe even the Messiah. But he is from Galilee. The Messiah is to come from Bethlehem, the city of David. Suddenly people are arguing, and they separate into two camps: those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah—the one from whom rivers of living water flow (John 7:38)—and those who think he couldn't possibly be the Messiah because his background doesn't square with the Scriptures. We would expect that Jesus' coming would usher in a time of peace, and yet there is division in the crowd, foreshadowing the divisions that will occur after his death and resurrection between those who believe in him and those who don't (John 7:43). But we shouldn't be surprised. Jesus himself said that he came “to bring not peace but the sword ... to set a man against his father and a daughter against his mother” (Matthew

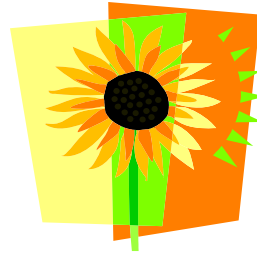
10:34,35).

The fact is, we can't remain indifferent to Jesus. We can't ignore or make light of his words and deeds. He makes amazing claims about who he is and what his Father has sent him to do. As the guards tell the Pharisees, “Never before has anyone spoken like this one” (John 7:46). Do we believe him or not? We have to choose. And when we do choose to believe in Jesus, we should not be surprised if some oppose us. It may even be members of our family, who feel uncomfortable with our beliefs; or our co-workers, who wonder why we live and act as we do. Some may even dislike or ridicule us for being Christian.

Yet Jesus loves everyone, even those who reject him. And if he loves them, so should we. Who knows? Maybe our love will help them choose to follow him. Stranger—and more wonderful—things have happened before. And we can be sure that God wants them to happen again! ***“Jesus, I choose to follow you. Help me to love even those who reject you. May I be a reflection of your light to them.”***

This Spring's 40 Days for Life is ongoing daily from 7am to 10pm and will end Palm Sunday, March 28. Your prayerful presence makes a lot of difference – in 2008 alone, abortion was reduced by 24%. Check for one nearest your neighborhood by logging in www.40daysforlife.com

The Abundance of God as an Invitation to Generosity



IN EXILE

BY RON ROLHEISER

While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him (Lk 15:20bc).

The sun is extraordinarily generous, giving huge parts of itself away every second.

Scientists tell us that every second, inside the sun, the equivalent of 4 million elephants are being transformed into light, an irretrievable, one-time gift. The sun is giving itself away. If this generosity should halt, all energy would eventually lose its source and everything would die and become inert. We, and everything on our planet, live because of the generosity of the sun.

In this generosity, the sun reflects the abundance of God, a largesse that invites us to also be generous, to have big-hearts, to risk more in giving ourselves away in self-sacrifice, to witness to God's abundance.

But this isn't easy. Instinctually we move more naturally to self-preservation and security. By nature we fear and we hoard. Because of this, whether we are poor or not, we tend to work out of a sense of scarcity, fearing always that we don't have enough, that there isn't enough, and that we need to be careful in what we give away, that we can't afford to be too generous.

But God belies this, as does nature. God is prodigal, abundance, generous, and wasteful beyond our small fears and imaginations. Nature too is stunningly overwhelming and prodigal. The scope of our universe, even just in so far as we know it, is almost unimaginable. So too is the abundance and prodigal character of God.

We see this, for instance, in the biblical parable of the Sower: The Sower, God, whom Jesus describes, is not a calculating person who sows his grain carefully and discriminately only into worthy soil. This Sower scatters seeds indiscriminately everywhere: on the road, in the bushes, in the rocks, into barren soil, as well as into good soil. He has, it seems, unlimited seeds and so he works from a generous sense of abundance rather than from a guarded sense of scarcity. We see that same abundance in the parable of the vineyard owner, where the owner, God, gives a full day's wage to everybody, whether he or she worked the full day or not. God, we are told, has limitless wealth and is not stingy in giving it out.

God is equally as prodigal and generous in forgiveness, as we see, in the Gospels. In the parable of the Father who for-

gives the prodigal son we see a person who can forgive out of a richness that dwarfs dignity and calculated cost to self. And we see this same largesse in Jesus himself as he forgives both those who executed him and those who abandoned him during his execution.

God, from everything we can see, is so rich

in love and mercy that he can afford to be wasteful, over-generous, non-calculating, non-discriminating, incredibly risk-taking, and big-hearted beyond our imaginations.

And that's the invitation: To have a sense of God's abundance so as to risk always a bigger heart and generosity beyond the instinctual fear that has us believe that, because things seem scarce, we need to be more calculating.

Gospel of Luke has one of the strongest social justice messages in all of scripture (every sixth line is a direct challenge for justice for the poor) and yet, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus, while warning about the danger of wealth, does not condemn the rich or riches. Rather he makes a distinction between the generous rich and the miserly rich. The former are good because they radiate and incarnate God's abundance and generosity while the latter are bad because they belie God's abundance, generosity, and huge heart.

Jesus assures us that the measure we measure out is the measure that we ourselves will receive in return. In essence, that says that the air we breathe out will be the air we re-inhale. That isn't just true ecologically. It is a broad truth for life in general. If we breathe out miserliness, we will re-inhale miserliness; if we breathe out pettiness, we will breathe in pettiness; if we breathe out bitterness, then bitterness will be the air that surrounds us; and if we breathe out a sense of scarcity that makes us calculate and be fearful, then calculation and fearfulness will be the air we re-inhale. But, if aware of God's abundance, we breathe out generosity and forgiveness, we will breathe in the air of generosity and forgiveness. We re-inhale what we exhale.

I have never met a truly generous man or woman who didn't say that, always, he or she received more in return than he or she gave out. And I have never met a truly big-hearted man or woman who lived out of a sense of scarcity. To be generous and big-hearted we have to first trust in God's abundance and generosity.

From God's abundance we get a sun that is generous and a universe that is too huge and prodigal to be imagined. That's a challenge not just to the mind and the imagination, but especially to the heart—for it to become huge and generous.

**Reading I: Joshua
5:9a, 10-12**

Last Sunday's second reading interpreted the manna as a type of the Eucharist. Today's Old Testament reading tells us that the manna ceased when the first Passover was celebrated in the Promised Land.

So, too, the Eucharist will cease when it finds its fulfillment in the messianic banquet of the kingdom of God.

Responsorial Psalm: 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7

Of this psalm the Jerome Biblical Commentary states: "A wisdom psalm, though it is widely classified as a psalm of thanksgiving."

Chiefly because of verse 8a, which serves as the refrain ("Taste and see the goodness of the Lord"), this psalm was used in the early Church during the time of communion.

Reading II: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

It is remarkable that Paul should appeal to the very people he calls a "new creation" to be reconciled to Christ.

This is because the community's status as the new

God responds to repentance



SCRIPTURE IN DEPTH

BY REGINALD H. FULLER

creation is not an assured possession but something that must constantly be worked at. To renew that status is the work of the apostolic ministry—the "ministry of reconciliation," as Paul calls it.

God's saving act in Christ and the ongoing work of the apostolic ministry are not to be separated. The second is an extension of the first, part of the same salvation history.

This salvation history is inaugurated by an event in which "for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin." This bold affirmation can best be understood in the light of the Marcan-Matthean word from the cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Here Jesus enters the deepest consequences of human sin—our alienation from God. He takes his stand where we are as sinners, under the wrath of God, alienated from him, so that we may become what he, Jesus, is—the righteousness of God.

The Greek Fathers were really saying the same thing when they asserted that Christ partook of our human nature in order that we might become partakers of his divine nature.

Gospel: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The second reading provides the right context for the interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son.

This parable is often understood as a simple illustration of God's readiness to forgive in response to repentance, without the necessity of Christ's atoning death on the cross. "There is no place for Jesus in the parable of the prodigal son," it has been said.

But the Jesus of the parables is never promulgating timeless truths of religion and ethics; he is always commenting on what is happening concretely in his own ministry.

The Pharisees were grumbling because Jesus was eating with outcasts (vv. 1-3: the Roman and Lutheran Lectionaries wisely start with this setting, while the Episcopal Lectionary less wisely omits it).

The parable is a comment on Jesus' action in eating with outcasts. He is not left out of the parable for the simple reason that the parable presupposes and interprets his action.

When Jesus eats with outcasts, it is not just humanitarian broadmindedness, as though the laws of God or the Pharisaic regulations did not matter; it is God breaking through the condemnation of his own law in order to reach out and save the lost.

Questions for Bible Study

BY ANNE OSDIECK, SAINT LOUIS CENTER FOR LITURGY

Exodus 3, Verses 1-8, 13-15

1. Did God call Moses for Moses' sake or for the Israelite people? Does God call each of us for the same reason(s)? "Does I Am Who Am" intervene in our history as he did in the Israelites'? Name some incidents that you think are/were God's interventions.

2. Is God calling all of us all the time, either to conversion or to action? God told Moses he was standing on holy ground. What made it holy? What is holy ground for you?

1 Corinthians 10, Verses 1-6, 10-12

1. Do you have to work at keeping a friendship alive and healthy? Does your answer have any implications about your relationship with God?

2. Are there opportunities for deeper conversion (turning more toward God) and productivity you could take advantage of? Are there some for your parish too?

Luke 13, Verses 1-9

1. In the book *Diary of a Country Priest* George Bernanos said, "Grace is everywhere." Do you always cooperate with it? Could you cooperate to a greater degree? How?

2. Do you give people another chance after they make a mistake? Does God use people as "gardeners" to help cultivate and fertilize with grace? Does God use you? Has God used others to help you bear fruit?

The parable of the two lost sons (vv. 11-32) is Jesus' self justification for "hosting" sinners at table fellowship (vv 1-2). The younger son (vv. 11-24). Fathers were discouraged from distributing inheritance during their lifetime (Sirach 33:20-24). But if he did, a father still was entitled to live off the proceeds while he lived.

This son acts shamefully, effectively wishing his father were dead. That the father did not explode and discipline him on the spot testifies to the depth of his love.

The elder son is no better. Instead of protesting the inappropriate property division and refusing his share, he accepts it (v. 12). And he makes no effort to reconcile his father and brother as culture demanded that he should. His behavior is equally shameful.

The younger son sinks deeper into shame. Selling his share of the family wealth infuriates his village neighbors (see 1 Kings 21:3). Losing his money to non-Judeans through wasteful spending in a far-off land makes things worse. When the famine comes, he begins to starve.

In desperation, he tries to leech on to a wealthy patron, who in turn hopes to repel him by assigning a repulsive job. To the amazement of all, this Judaic lad agrees to feed pigs.

Still he starves. The carob pods fed to the pigs were the wild variety with bitter berries, nauseating and insufficiently nourishing to humans. Even though entitled to a share of butchered animals, the Judaic boy could not eat this forbidden food.

Motivated by his severe hunger, he regrets having lost the money (vv. 17-19). Not only can he no longer support himself, but he is also unable now to care for his father in old age. This he deeply regrets.

His solution? He resolves to become a "hired servant" of his family, thereby regaining a measure of honor, independence, and a social status equal to his brother and father. Moreover, he will be able to pay back what he lost, that is, he will be able to take care of

Forgiven

But 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". (Lk 15:22)



HISTO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

BY JOHN J. PILCH

his father for as long as the father lives.

He is willing to accept the shameful fact that the village will disown, reject, and physically abuse him for taking inheritance from the father before his death and then losing it to Gentiles, that is, non-Judeans (See Sirach 26:5). He judges this a small price to pay for life and food.

The father then acts totally out of cultural character. He runs (very inappropriate for an elder) the gauntlet the village has prepared for the returning wayward son. He publicly forgives the son by kissing him again and again on the cheeks, and heals the broken relationship between them.

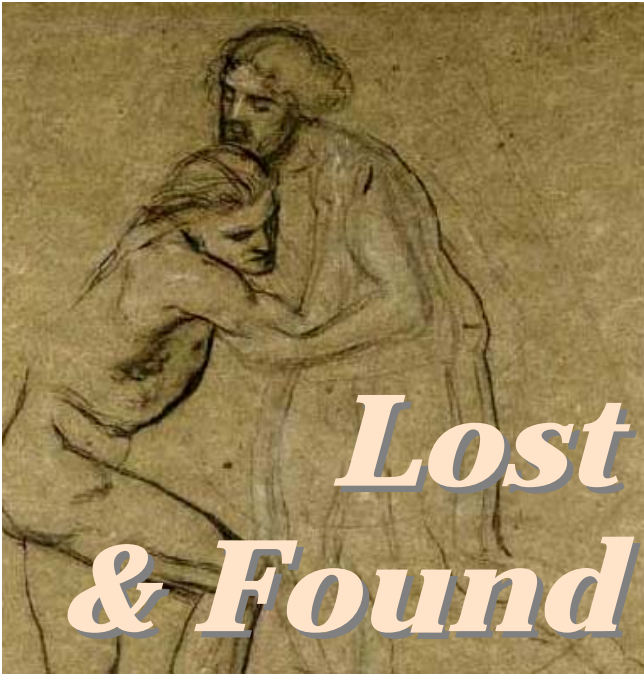
The best robe is certainly the father's. It will guarantee the son's accep-

tance by the community at the banquet. The signet ring indicates enormous trust. The sandals are a sign of being a free man in the house, not a servant. By placing sandals on his feet, the servants signal their reacceptance of him as son.

Killing the calf means the entire village will be invited and prodded toward forgiveness. This size animal can feed more than one hundred people.

The elder son (vv. 25-32). Instead of honoring his father by accepting his brother and playing his appropriate role as chief host at the meal, the elder son publicly insults and humiliates his father (vv. 28-30).

Here the parable ends, rather abruptly. What did the elder son do? That question the Pharisees and scribes (see Luke 15:2) and the modern believer must answer. What would you do?



Lost & Found

“Everything I have is yours.”

I believe it was the first directed retreat I made. Until then, our eight-day yearly Jesuit retreats consisted of four or five conferences a day, delivered by a preacher and mulled over by us retreatants.

Now I had a director who would assign me readings from the scripture and expect me to report how my five hours of prayer developed as the days went on.

I had found a dissatisfying pattern to my preached retreats. Somehow, after the third or fourth day (usually crowned by a yearly general confession), I seemed not to know what to do. My work, I felt, was over. My life was tidied up. All I could do was wait for the retreat to end.

Although my director for the private retreat did not like the idea of a general confession, he eventually relented on the sixth day. My work, once more, was done. Or so I thought.

What this guy did was give me five more meditations on sin—after the sixth day! And what a day it was.

I remember clearly resenting the fact that I was still thinking about sin when things should be winding down. Here I was being forced to muck around some more in my own depravity, and I was beginning to seethe. My philosophical study of atheists like Jean-Paul Sartre began to haunt me. I had read in his play *The Devil and the Good Lord* that the existence of God degrades the existence of humanity, and I was now suspecting that Sartre could be right.

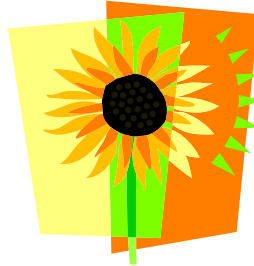
As day turned to evening, I found myself resisting the whole notion of sin. What’s the point of such negativity? Sin. Sin. Sin. God seems to exact from us a degrading admission that we are dirt, junk. The more I thought about sin, the more it nauseated me. The more I reflected on God’s mercy, the more I was turned off

by it.

At this point I started to worry about my resistance. To be honest, I began to wonder whether I really believed in God in the first place. Well, rather than face that abyss, I concentrated on an old prayer which hitherto had always calmed me down. “O God, you know me and you love me.” That would do the trick.

But it didn’t. I got more resentful at God. And more worried that I might not even have faith in God.

After an hour of fret called meditation, a little variation on my prayer came to mind. Say: “O God, you know me and you love me; and it’s not because of anything I have ever done or accomplished.”



THE WORD ENGAGED
BY JOHN KAVANAUGH

Now, dear reader, I do not know where that idea came from. But I hated it. Every time I approached uttering the final clause, I gagged. “It’s not because of anything I have ever done or accomplished. . . .” I just could not say it. It seemed as if everything would fall apart if I did.

My efforts don’t count? Then why not have an affair, abandon my vows? Why not kill somebody? Didn’t sacrifices count? Didn’t my hard work matter? Then why on earth have I been trying so hard? If what I’ve done or accomplished doesn’t earn God’s love and salvation, then why have I been trying to do the right thing?

“I’ve slaved for you. . . .”

The story of the prodigal son invaded my memory. That second son. The son who slaved. The son who resented the father’s forgiveness for an ingrate brother who botched everything. The son who would not join the party. The son whose father pleaded. The son who complained.

“For years now I have slaved for you. I never disobeyed one of your orders, yet you never gave me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends. Then when this son of yours returns after having gone through your property with loose women, you kill the fatted calf for him.”

Somehow I knew my sin as I had never known before. Yet, oddly, I felt God’s love with startling newness and equal intensity. “My son, you are with me always, everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate and rejoice. . . .”

When hearing the story of the Prodigal Son, we often think of the compassionate father waiting at the gate or the desperate son planning his confession in advance. But might there not be a second child in all of us? We work hard, we manicure virtues, we collect the graces, we notch up victories. And we forget what is already ours. The gift, the grace, the kingdom, the love not earned but lavishly given. Before long, our labors become slavery; our accomplishments, chains.

I thought if I would ever say a prayer like, “You know me and you love me, and it’s not because of anything I have ever done or accomplished,” I would surely stop working.

As it turned out, the next year I worked harder than I ever had before. But that year, it was less from fear and more from joy.

Luke reminds us that the parable of the prodigal was told to Pharisees who complained about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. Now, in relief, I thank God for such a banquet.