

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

March 18, 2007 – Fourth Sunday in Lent

Text: Luke 3:1-3; 11b-52

Pr. Robert Goldstein

“ Dare We Run? ”

When it comes to interpreting Scripture we usually pay attention to what we can get from it, so to speak. We often forget something far more important that is as close as the nose on our face. What we get from Scripture depends a whole lot on what *we* bring to it!

If we come seeking immutable moral laws we'll probably eke some out. And if we come with the need for proofs, we'll probably deduce some. And then we shall have our reward – a poverty indeed.

But if we come with just an open heart, come with a simple hunger for hearing and understanding just one godly thing, come with such prayerful purity of heart, then our reward shall be great indeed. As Luther put it in the catechism,

I believe I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ or come to Christ. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with her gifts.

Bring an open heart to this great story of the prodigal son and great shall be your reward.

I suppose we all can identify with the prodigal one. Have not all of us rebelled against our parents or families? For some of us our struggle to find our sexual identity is knotted into that gnarled thread. But it could also be the refusal to follow in the family business, or other family expectations. Yes, this parable captures those deep movements of the heart in its weaving of words.

This young man's rebellion goes further. He wants his share of the family inheritance *now*. Right then and there. And he intends to spend it. Such a request not only rejects the family expectation that he would use his wealth to further the family's interests, but his hot-headed departure rejects also the whole village to which his family belongs and probably leads. Whether this was the intention of this young and troubled mind, rejection was nevertheless the effect on his family and his community. Rejection of what they all struggle for.

That this wealth is soon dispatched in dissipation, drunkenness and dissolute living, only darkens the picture this young man is painting of himself.

In the discipline of Lent we ought not to look at him as much as look at ourselves. And if our past or even our present resonates to this wasting of what is precious in human

relationships, then we ought to begin the walk back to make amends as best we can –with family or friends, with God.

May God give us the grace, the resolve and the strength! For some of us fear we will meet only the same closed hearts and minds we met before. In that case all we can do is share our pain with trusted friends and with God. She'll understand.

And then there's the elder son. Before we fall into self-righteous mode, in the spirit of Lent, let us see ourselves through him too. I think we will find ourselves there too!!

This guy stayed at home and worked hard. And why not? In that Palestinian culture, as the elder son, he was guaranteed a double share in the inheritance. Perhaps that injustice motivated his younger brother's anger.

And even though his frosty reception to the news of his brother is wanting in kindness, one must bear in mind that younger brother now had no assets and so elder brother was obligated to provide lifelong support. In that light his response is all too human.

What is Jesus' point? (May our hearts be simply open, O God, to your Spirit!) The things of redemption and true happiness require us to rise above the logic of good business prudence. After all younger brother has now become an unwanted economic burden. And resentment is a poor substitute for some simple love and a good cry that would bring the brothers back together.

Grudges bring death. Forgiveness brings life. Our elder brother does not acquit himself well, even though he is on firm legal ground. But then he insults his father and probably the invited villagers by refusing his father's invitation to the great and joyous feast. Elder brother needs time to let go of his resentments.

Perhaps that's where we are too. If you are going to list your justifications for your estrangements you are not ready either. When will you be? And in our struggles for justice, when those we were forced to despise finally come home to justice, then it's time, it is as ripe as the fig tree, time for us to let our complaints go.

Can we identify with the father? He is the icon of Jesus' God. Every day dad skims the horizon with sadness, until that one startling afternoon when he recognizes the distinctive gait of his son ambling towards the village. Father runs to child. Running in robes was considered very improper for a village elder. But he runs anyway to preempt violent attacks on his son by villagers whom his son has also dishonored. His embrace and his kiss were as political as they were compassionate, protective as well as genuinely welcoming his long lost son.

What is the Word of God for us? Whether we identify with the younger or the elder son, the presence of God in our baptized lives invites us to live like their father. Receive the younger

son, as the saying goes, “Don’t cry over spilt milk.” We still have the cow! With the elder son we still have so much and have regained something far more valuable than all the “it”, a brother, a sister.

Remember that this greatest of parables begins with the clergy and laity of the day grumbling over the fact that Jesus not merely eats with the sinners, but welcomes them, that is, invites the marginalized to eat with him at his dinner table. His religion of hospitality begins with hearts open to God, to that purity of heart that is blessed to see God. God is not hard to see in simplicity.

For this parable shows God as boundlessly compassionate for all his children –pulling up his robe, risking dishonor to himself in the eyes of his community, and running to his lost one. And why? For the redemption of the *whole* community, not only so both sons can be freed from their demons, their sins, but so that the whole village gains and rejoices.

We are feeding already some of San Francisco’s marginalized at our tables in this church. Are we Pharisees grumbling? When shall we eat with them? Tough stuff! Tough stuff! It ain’t rocket science! But it is the God of Jesus. We have to risk society’s dishonor to honor God’s forgotten children. For, like Jesus, from them we will learn greater things of God than from the theologies. There’s no other way. An open heart is given the eyes to see God. Dare we run like that father? Dare we run to them? Amen

St. Francis Lutheran Church
152 Church Street, SF, CA 94114-1111
Phone: (415) 621-2635; Fax: (415) 621-8819
E-mail: StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net
www.st-francis-lutheran.org