

The Inclusive Community

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 14, 2010

Choices

Luke 15 1-3, 11-32

Homily of Rev. Dr. Anthony T. Padovano

We generally focus on the father or the younger son in this Parable of the Lost or Prodigal son, and rightly so. That is where Jesus places the emphasis on a father who forgives extravagantly, recklessly because he recovers a son he thought he had lost forever. If the father represents God's love and tells us what God is like, then we know that we shall never be lost and that the arms and the heart of God will be there when we pass into the absolute and total loss of death. If this be so, despair is never in order.

Or, we might focus, as Jesus does, on the younger son. Perhaps he represents all of us. We mess things up, sometimes big time, and we are ashamed. We become discouraged with ourselves and we fear the judgment of others. So we withdraw because, we reason, we are now unwelcome. Have we not all been there, in a greater or lesser measure? The younger son represents how important it is for us not to be so paralyzed by shame that we do not walk back. The young son never cared about the pain, the tears, the heartache of the father. He'll get over it, he may have thought. The father never did. The younger son is a witness to the fact that there is always more love and life in the world than our stupidity, our shame, our cruelty, our insensitivity. We find that place of expansive love and life whenever we care about the pain others bear so that we might live in this world. The pain begins with the agony of our mother giving birth and the burden a father carries so that we are cared for properly.

So we might focus only on the father and the younger son. And if we do, we have quite a story.

Let me however, look in two other directions. Let us look, first, at the audience: they are an odd and incompatible assortment. There are tax collectors and sinners filled with shame. They have done terrible things in their lives.

In our day, this crowd of the rejected might be a same-sex couple, a woman who had an abortion, a young man with AIDS, a woman who is a prostitute, someone who hurt his or her parents badly and can find no one to forgive, a person just released from prison, a man who lost his job, his home, his dignity and fears everyone sees him as a loser.

The second direction I would like to look is at the older brother.

We might sympathize with him a bit. He works hard and he has asked for nothing. His brother ran off and left him with even more work to do. His brother has caused him pain, does not care and is having a grand time.

We meet him in a fit of rage, a fury so incendiary that it will burn anything that comes near. He wants his brother to suffer. He will never forgive his father for letting this dirty, offensive, repulsive person back in the house.

Scripture often has stories of lost sons and fraternal rivalry. There are Cain and Abel, sons of Adam and Eve, and Abel has been murdered. There are Jacob and Esau, sons of Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob has deceived his father and stolen Esau's birthright and inheritance. Families are sometimes messy battlefields.

The older son might not grieve very much if the younger son died, as Abel did, nor would he feel any sorrow if the younger son were told by the father never to return again. Jacob had the decency to run away and stay away after his robbery of his older brother.

The older son is convinced, as many of us are that if someone gains something, we lose. His father tells him: My son, you lose nothing. All I have is yours. You are the only heir to this property. Your brother lost his share and I am not allowed to give him yours, nor will I. But can you find no place in your heart to give him a place at our table? He knows he has been a loser. He knows you will never forgive him. His is afraid of you. What will you gain if I crush him? What advantage will you have if I let you throw him out?

Notice the contrasts Jesus is giving us. When we deal with what the older son is dealing with, we have a choice.

It might be resentment or forgiveness. The resentment feels better than forgiveness.

The choice might be envy or generosity. The envy fuels our desire to have this person fail and perish.

We might select anger or compassion. In anger, we ask, why should I feel anything for him? He felt nothing for me.

Remember the parable Jesus once told of the laborers who came to work at different times during the day. At the end of the day, those who worked a short time got the same pay as those who worked all day. Jesus had the employer ask why some resented this when

everyone got what the employer agreed to pay. If the employer gave the late arrivals less, those who worked all day were getting exactly what they expected. They were angry that others got more even if it cost them nothing.

The older brother chooses resentment, envy and anger. We can understand why. We are not out of sympathy with his feelings, nor is the father. The father left the party to plead with his son and to tell him he would lose nothing that was coming to him if he would be a bit more generous with his shattered brother.

What would you have me do, the father says in effect? My son is bleeding in his very soul. Do I leave him on the wayside of life and pass him by? Do I let him bleed to death? And what shall we gain if he dies? Will the resentment go away or the envy cease or the anger end? And if they do not, we shall all be lost.

Do we want a world of lost spirits? Do we want a God who sees to it that we are all lost?

In just such a world, a world of no hope and healing, every one of us is marked for destruction.