

## **September 11, 2016 The Prodigal Son Homily:**

In the early 1960's the then reigning pontiff, Pope John XXIII, held a private audience with a delegation of Jewish leaders. For centuries, relations between the two faiths were, to say the least, strained. The Pope's words of welcome broke the ice. He spoke warmly of his profound respect for the Jewish people: "I am Joseph, your brother". You may recall that the biblical figure of Joseph was the youngest of the twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob. His warm greeting marked a new beginning for the two great monotheistic faiths. A quarter of a century later, his successor, Pope John Paul II became the first pope since the earliest years of the Church to visit a synagogue. In his prepared remarks, he said to the members of the Jewish congregation, "You are our beloved brothers, and in a certain way, our older brothers".

In the justly celebrated parable of the prodigal son, two brothers are featured. For the early Church fathers, the elder brother is a symbol of the Jewish faith. He is the one who has remained with the father. Said the elder son in the parable, "For years now I have slaved for you. I never disobeyed one of your orders" (Lk.15:29). The father reassures him: "You are with me always" (Lk.15:31). The younger son is a representative of all those who are not of the chosen people. Among them are the gentiles, pagans, and heathens. They are most in need of the father's mercy and forgiveness.

In his reflections on this parable, the noted spiritual writer, Fr. Thomas Keating, a Trappist monk, writes. "What emerges as the primary concern of the Father is the reconciliation of the two sons, to bring them together in love. His chief concern is not justice but mercy. The heavenly father seeks the unity of the family, the removal of divisions and barriers." Bear in mind also that one of the keys to interpreting this parable can be found in the opening sentences of the 15th chapter of Luke's gospel. The Pharisees and Scribes are deeply offended by Our Lord's table companions. The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around Jesus to hear him, at which the Pharisees and the Scribes murmured, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Lk.15:1). The Jewish leaders are invited to find themselves represented in the parable as the older son. Will they accept as members of the family those whom God accepts? When one has no father, he has no brothers!

I must offer you my confession as your pastor. For years I have divided my parish into two groups, the practicing Catholic and the non-practicing Catholic, the devout and the indifferent, the people I know and the anonymous. The gospel reminds me that I am the spiritual father of all who claim Sacred Heart Church as their home, regardless if I know them or not, regardless if they are practicing members of my congregation or not!

A few years ago, a funeral director in Albany told me of the number of priests who refuse to officiate at funerals of those who are not registered members of their parish. In such cases, the funeral director turned to one priest of the diocese for help, Fr. Anthony Gulley. He never failed him. Fr. Gulley would say, "What time is the funeral? I'll be there". Fr. Gulley made no distinctions. As "Father", he welcomed all who desired his services!

It is surely worthy of note that the parable of the Prodigal Son ends with a meal. It is a reminder of Jesus's table fellowship with the despised and rejected. It is a powerful testimony of the Divine Mercy.

Amen.