

September 15, 2013 The Prodigal Son:

Not long after I arrived in Frankfort to begin my assignment as Pastor of the local Catholic community, I was informed by some of the local residents of a particularly brutal murder, which had occurred in the village sometime in the early 1960's.

One day a young man, gun in hand, walked into the village police station and opened fire on his then girl friend, who was, at the time, a village employee. The unsuspecting young woman was mortally wounded in the attack. The assailant's name was Ben. He was immediately arrested by the police and later tried for the crime of first degree murder. Ben was convicted by a jury and sentenced by the judge to a lengthy prison term.

After forty five years in the state penitentiary Ben was finally paroled. Upon his release from prison his sole desire was to return to the village in which he had been raised. Since the people of the village have such long memories, Ben's wish was denied. He was not welcomed back! A short time thereafter, Ben was again apprehended by the Albany police for the crime of shoplifting.

During his incarceration in the Albany County Jail I had an opportunity to pay him a visit. Initially, Ben treated me with great suspicion, but after a few moments of conversation he warmed up to me as his unknown pastor. Like the prodigal son in today's parable, Ben had fond memories of his childhood. He spoke warmly of people who had long since passed away and had expressed his disappointment that he would never be allowed to return home. Had he squandered his inheritance, his moral capital, with the people of the village? He seemed to be a pariah in the village, even after forty five years had passed. Reconciliation proved to be impossible.

One of the great Doctors of the Church, St. Ambrose, interpreted the merciless, unforgiving elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son as the arrogant Christian who is jealous of a sinner's reconciliation. In his words "He is called older because an envious person ages quickly". The elder brother is any Christian who is resentful of a repentant sinner.

What lessons can be learned from the Parable of the Prodigal Son? First, our turning away from God often has tragic consequences. The late Pope John Paul II wrote the following: "The Prodigal son represents every human being bewitched by the temptation to separate himself from the Father in order to live his own independent existence". As we move further away from the security and warmth of the Father's House, we suffer the inevitable consequences, namely, disappointment, embarrassment, misery, anger and humiliation.

Secondly, the parable speaks beautifully of what God is like. He is a Father of love, of tenderness and of mercy. In the parable, all the Father wants is to have his son back. Even though he had wasted his share of the inheritance, the father cannot forget his flesh and blood. Once the wastrel son came to his senses, he acknowledged that he no longer deserved to be called a son. One can only then be astonished at the father's reaction once the young man returned home. "He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him."

Finally, the parable teaches that we should receive back the converted sinner with generosity and mercy. There is a story told about Abraham Lincoln, one of our nation's greatest presidents. As the Civil War raged, someone asked the President how he would treat the Confederacy after the war had ended. He replied: "I'll treat them as if they never left home".

It is for good reason that the story of the Prodigal Son is one of the best loved parables told by Our Lord. If my beloved former parishioners were to ponder its message they may have been prepared to extend a hand of mercy to a convicted murderer and native son. Reconciliation would then be accomplished.

Amen.