

Sermon for Lent 4C 14 March 2010 – St. Francis

I suspect most of you recognize the Gospel reading we just heard as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. You may have some strong emotions tied to this story depending on your own family. That is the beauty of this story Jesus wove. It speaks to some basic realities of family life: sibling rivalry and parental devotion; our need to be loved and our capacity to show love.

I wonder where you see yourself in this parable? One wag in my EFM class remarked, “I think I’m the fatted calf – I’m the one who always gets sacrificed in my family.” You may know that feeling. That is the wonder of a parable.

A parable’s meaning can grow, can twist and can convict as the listener continues to ponder the story. While the story appears straight forward enough there are several details that Jesus’ audience in Palestine would have understood that may be missed by our 21st century eyes. First of all the younger son asks to get his share of his inheritance before his father’s death. In the patriarchal society in which Jesus lived this was tantamount to denying his father’s existence. In other words he might have well said, “Dad, I wish you would just go ahead and die.” Another important point is that in the time of this parable inheritance laws dictated that the elder son received a double portion of the father’s estate. Thus when the father goes ahead and divides the estate the older son would get twice as much as the younger son. If you were paying attention you heard that the father did give each son their share of his estate. Therefore the elder son is enjoying his share of his inheritance as he continues to work the land. He may refer to himself as working like a slave but in reality he is working the land that is already his.

Now how the brothers enjoy their respective inheritance varies greatly. The younger son having spent his entire share decides to work with pigs. At this point a collective shudder of horror would have run through Jesus’ audience as pigs were considered unclean. For this son to work with pigs made him unclean and truly unfit to be treated as the son of a faithful Jew. Finally this parable follows on the heels of the parable of the lost coin and the parable of the lost sheep. Maintaining this lost theme many preachers focus on the younger son as the lost one in this parable. My own take on the parable has changed in the last few of years.

I grew up in a smaller nuclear family in the years known as the Baby Boom years. I had one older brother who was 3 years my senior. Sibling rivalry was hot in our home. I remember repeatedly asking my parents to have another child – one I could get along with. I could never understand why my father maintained that he believed in ZPG, Zero Population Growth. Any sibling would have been better than the one I had, I firmly believed. My brother and my ongoing battles were so notorious that our grandparents refused to keep both of us at the same time. Over time we each found ways to get the recognition we craved.

My brother was an extrovert and a charmer who never met a stranger. He also had many talents and abilities as well as a multitude of interests. By the time he was 16 not only was he an Eagle Scout but also the youngest man in the area who had earned his pilot's license. When he went away to college and then took off to travel the country I enjoyed having my parents and home to myself. If my parents would not give me another sibling, functioning as the only child worked well for me. Therefore, I have tended to identify with the older son in the parable. While his brother was out doing whatever he wanted to do the elder son worked the fields and worked to further ingratiate himself in his father's favor. But if this parable is about those who are lost I have come to understand that the elder son is also lost: Lost in the need to be the one, the only one who has his father's love. Lost in the belief that his actions should guarantee his father's love while his brother's actions should preclude his father's love. Lost in failing to recognize that he needs his brother just as much as his father needs his son. Caught up in hard work and the need to prove himself he has missed that he has always had his father's love. If he can just get passed his anger at what he considers the "unfairness" of it all he might just realize that the love he accuses his father of lavishing on his brother is also being lavished on him. While he is busy yelling at his father how to act, he misses the feast that is also offered to him.

Five years ago, I was the supply priest here at St. Francis for the Second Sunday of the Christmas season. It was a Sunday that was filled with joy and celebration and remains a happy memory. I could not know that day how dramatically my life would change the next day, as there is no way to prepare to learn I had lost my only sibling. Our parents had been gone for quite awhile before my brother died unexpectedly from an undiagnosed ulcer. We had long ago worked out much of our sibling rivalry. We talked, joked and fought (some things do not change) on the phone at least a couple

of times a week. In the years since his death, I am coming to understand how much I did need him all those years. I now appreciate how his wicked sense of humor served as an important balance to my serious sense of self. I have come to see how his unbounded joy and love of life have helped me treasure every day I have. And I have come to understand how much our battles kept us both balanced as we served each other by being an important check to our individual faults and foibles. No one of us has the complete truth. Not one of us knows all about our own self.

Jesus' parable focuses not only on the lost younger son but also on the lost quality of the older son. This parable is told to the scribes and Pharisees who have criticized Jesus for associating with sinners. How dare he spend time with those who had broken God's law? How could he choose to feast with those who had failed to follow God's rules? They, the keepers of God's law, the guards of God's temple, and they alone were the ones God should choose to invite to the feast. Jesus' parable reminds them that there are various ways a person can become lost. Still despite their resistance to love the wayward, in spite of their indignation at the love so freely offered those who failed to follow the rules, they like the older son are invited to enjoy the richness of the banquet.

Jesus' parable ends with the father and older son standing outside the banquet hall. Each of us is given the chance of finishing the parable for ourselves. Are you ready to go into the banquet hall?

