

## Lent 2 - Saturday

St. Anthony's, West Vancouver

3 March 2018

Dear Father Larry, and dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

### *Introduction*

The Gospel today identifies two kinds of people: those who were listening to and following Jesus and those who were complaining about him. It says: "Tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them'" (Lk 15:1-2).

The following Parable of the Prodigal Son – or better, of the Merciful Father – unveils to us why the tax collectors wanted to listen to Jesus, and why he welcomed them. In his company, they were at home and experienced forgiveness, the sign of Jesus' love, and a reflection of his immeasurable mercy.

The Pharisees and scribes' hearts were unforgiving. This is why they could not fathom the immensity of Jesus' hospitable character towards the sinners and tax collectors. Such an unwillingness to forgive has caused many wars between countries, divorces in families, the breakup of long friendships, enmity among clergy, and the bankruptcy of our spirituality. A hardened heart becomes incapable of loving and

caring. If we cannot forgive others or experience their forgiveness, we drag a weight behind us that drains our energy in life.

To understand the power of forgiveness Jesus tells us this beautiful parable. Broken as he was, the younger son was tenderly embraced by his father and, being enfolded, he was healed and made whole again.

But this is my story, your story. We have all of us wandered – some spectacularly and dramatically, others more by way of hidden and less observable compromises. In the parable, however, there is room for each of us. In the story of this young man there are three key stages with which, in a certain sense, each of us can identify when we yield to temptation and fall into sin.

Therefore, this parable, so dear to the Church's tradition, expresses in a simple and profound way the reality of conversion, giving us a concrete expression of the work of divine mercy in the human world.

The first stage is *the distancing*. We distance ourselves from God, like that son from his father, when we forget that the goods and talents we possess were given to us by God as a task to be completed, and we thoughtlessly squander them. Sin is always a waste of our humanity, a waste of the inheritance of divine grace.

I think that many people spontaneously have the same concept of life as the prodigal son of the Gospel. He had his share of the patrimony given to him and then he felt free; in the end, what he wanted was to live

no longer burdened by the duties and responsibilities of home, but just to live on his own. He wanted everything that life can offer. He wanted to enjoy it to the full – only living immersed in life’s abundance, missing none of all the valuable things it can offer. The prodigal son was the original “you can have it all” man.

The second stage is the *process of conversion*. It begins with the son who found himself caring for pigs and even envying those animals. His life had become so empty and so useless. When he reached the very lowest point, hungry and abandoned, he realized how foolish he had been to leave his loving father. He who voluntarily left his Father’s house realizes what he has lost and gradually makes the decisive step of coming to himself: “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands’” (Lk 15:19).

The certainty that God “is good and loves me” is stronger than shame and discouragement.

Lastly, we reach the third stage of the journey: **the return** of the son to the father’s house.

### *Merciful Father*

#### *Possible Reactions*

The father’s options with his returning son were many: he could

have scolded him, or demanded an apology, or he could have been condescendingly accepting, or he could even have disowned him, or he could have demanded that the son make restitution by working as a hired hand.

But the Father chose forgiveness.

Now there are many ways of forgiving. It's often done reluctantly, holding back, conveying continuing guilt to the recipient. No doubt you have experienced that kind of forgiveness, or even dealt it out yourself. Worse even is when, at times, the forgiver, in a form of blackmail, implies that the other's sin will still in some way be held over him: "I forgive," is accompanied by an expressed or implicit "but I will never forget." With this father, though, the forgiveness was total, offering to treat the son's sins as though they had never happened. And that made it a joyous occasion for father and son alike.

The father of the prodigal son is faithful to his fatherhood, faithful to the love that he had always lavished on his son. This fidelity is expressed by joy, that merrymaking for the squanderer after his return, merrymaking which is so generous that it provokes the opposition and envy of the elder brother, who had never gone far away from his father and had never abandoned the home.

We read, in fact, that when the father saw the prodigal son returning home he "was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms

around him and kissed him” (Lk 15:20). He certainly did this out of deep affection, and with exquisite generosity toward his son, a generosity which so angers the elder son.

The one important thing for the father is that his son has been found. The embrace between this merciful father and the prodigal son becomes a celebration of forgiveness and joy.

### ***Lent: Being Forgiven and Forgiving***

During Lent, Jesus is calling all of us to follow the example of the father in the parable of the prodigal son: that our hearts should be built on forgiveness – both on being forgiven and on forgiving.

So, if you have not forgiven someone yet, someone who hurt you or someone you have hurt, this is the appointed time for you to go to that person and say with a loving voice: “I forgive you!”, knowing that you can do this because you have been yourself forgiven by the Lord.

### ***Conclusion***

The Lord is prodigal with us in the Eucharist – his supreme act of generosity and liberality. As we feed on the Body and Blood of Christ, let us insert ourselves into his divine mystery of forgiveness: being forgiven and forgiving.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB  
Archbishop of Vancouver