

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the Fourth Sunday of Lent (Year C)
“Let’s reconsider the parable of the prodigal daughter or son”

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Reflections on **Joshua 5:9, 10-12; 2 Cor. 5: 17-21; Lk 15: 1-3, 11-32**

Rejoice! This is *Laetare* weekend, which bids us, “rejoice!” This is also a time in the church when change is in the air and new possibilities are opening up. So it is a good time to hear the message of all three of today’s readings: It is a time to let bygones be bygones and make a fresh start.

The first reading opens with God saying to Joshua, *Today I rolled away from you the reproach of Egypt.* The context is this: The children of Israel have just crossed over the Jordan into the Promised Land; the river even parted its waters to let them pass on dry land. Then came a mass circumcision, a rite the Israelites had not observed in Egypt nor in the wilderness, but one that is a sign of the covenant, and a requirement to celebrate the Passover. With this, the “reproach of Egypt” has been left behind them. And with the celebration of the Passover meal, the wilderness years and their special nourishment of manna also belongs to the past. A new era has begun.

The second reading, from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, also speaks clearly of a new beginning: *For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation. The old order has passed away; now everything is new!* Again “reproach” has been put behind them: *For our sake, God made the One who was without sin to be sin, so that by this means we might become the very holiness of God.*

These are mysterious and extraordinary statements. It is not entirely clear why there was “reproach” for the Israelites having lived in Egypt. They went there originally for a perfectly innocent reason – there was a famine in Palestine. But with a change of regime, they

were enslaved, and life became hard.

And what did it mean for Jesus the Christ to become “sin” so that we might become “the very holiness of God”? Perhaps both statements taken together suggest that real life, especially in difficult situations of any sort—in ancient Egypt, Roman Palestine, or 21st century America—can have a brutalizing, dehumanizing effect, with or without personal blame or sin. From this we need to be freed, and God promises to free us, so we can make a fresh start.

In today’s gospel reading, we see and hear the “One who was made sin.” Jesus is reflecting about the real life he sees around him: the people he keeps company with, who are gathered in a close circle; and the observers and listeners who hold themselves at a distance. To both he presents his idea about what God might be seeing. In his parable

Jesus gives vivid portraits of a prodigal son, his extravagantly forgiving father, and his law-abiding, but ungenerous, older brother.

Probably every family has a “prodigal daughter or son” story of some kind. In our society we raise our children to leave home, and we watch them go. On the one hand we admire their willingness to step out into a bigger world, to enlarge their horizons, and to test their capacities in new ways. We hope they will find satisfying work, make successful marriages, raise well-adjusted families, and make a positive contribution to the society around them. On the other hand, we fear that inexperience, poor judgment, bad luck, or worse, the lure of some kind of immediate gratification, like hard partying, will lead to serious problems, even

disaster.

We know that our children may come home destitute and broken in spirit, as today's prodigal does.

Jesus's parable speaks to a wide variety of people, both then and now. But in the gospel context, the audience is basically split in two: there is an inner ring of "tax collectors and sinners" – "prodigals." These are the kind of people Jesus likes to hang out with, whose company he finds congenial. Then there are the Pharisees and scribes, who observe and listen in from a distance. To them Jesus really does "become sin" (to use Paul's phrase), because he welcomes sinners, the "prodigals," and eats with them. These people are the ones who compromise Jewish law by working for the Romans, or who sell their bodies to make it in the world.

Or, we could look at these two groups in a slightly different way. First there are those who have left the safe haven of home – they might have been forced out by circumstances, as must have been frequently the case with prostitutes (how many might have been widows and orphans with no other recourse) – or they might have been lured out by possibilities in the wider world (the risk-takers). And then there are those who chose, or were able, to stay comfortably at home.

Jesus's inner circle of tax collectors and "sinners" surely rejoiced when they heard the heart-tugging "welcome home" scene that has continued to inspire so many great artists and writers down the ages. This truly was the promise of a fresh start. Note that there is not even a hint of "reproach" in the Father's embrace of his long-lost child.

But "reproach" *does* characterize the older brother, and Jesus's other audience, the scribes and Pharisees. They see themselves as faithful and obedient children of God. Jesus does not deny this. Indeed, in his portrait of the older son, he says that they are beloved children of God. But they aren't the only beloved ones, and their reproachful words and attitudes are at odds with God's intent.

It is not surprising that the elder son should

be reproachful of his brother, but he is also reproachful of his father. Who can miss the tone of his retort: *This son of yours [has come] home after going through your money with prostitutes.* Can you imagine the scene? Jesus, who is surrounded by prostitutes and other low life, is saying out loud what the scribes and Pharisees are murmuring quietly to themselves: "He consorts with sinners!" Jesus himself is a kind of prodigal to his own religious establishment. But to him these "sinners" are people whose names he knows, whose often tragic personal stories he has heard. He sees real people behind the easy label.

The reproaches of the elder son are a challenge to his father. The elder son is, after all, the presumed heir, watching out for his legacy. He thinks he knows what his father ought to do and say. Like the scribes and Pharisees, he speaks not for a new creation, but for the established order, the status quo, "tradition" with a small "t", "the way we do things around here."

Of course, he is the "good" son, with a small kind of goodness. In a recent reflection, Sr. Joan Chittester observed that:

*The problem with goodness
is that it can become so dull,
so functional, so scripted, so smothering
that we lose touch entirely with all the other
ways God has of showing us what life is
really all about.*

This seems to happen a lot with religious people, then and now. The prodigal son, for all his presumed faults and his evident failures, has found out something about "what life is really all about."

Jesus does not deny that there is virtue in faithfulness, and stability, and the passing on of received wisdom. That is why the father says to his elder son, *everything I have is yours* – "it's there for you to use; so use it." But on the negative side, those who stay at home, always in their comfort zone, often suffer from a narrowness of outlook and a resistance to change, especially if it seems to threaten their status. And with that comes defensiveness and resentment.

This "elder brother syndrome," as we might call it, is a problem with all institutions, espe-

cially religious ones – whether it be synagogues, churches, or mosques. Their leaders think that they are called upon to speak for God, and they expect that their words will be received as the words of God. But their vision tends to be too small, too static, too stuck in the past.

This is not always the case. Fifty years ago, at the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church stepped out of its comfort zone to meet the modern world where it was. The bishops gathered there resolved to share, as Jesus did, “the joy and hope, the grief and anguish, of the people of our time.” Those are the opening words of that great Vatican II document, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, also known as *Gaudium et spes*, “Joy and hope.”

We have another inspiring example in the women's religious orders, who rediscovered

their founding charisms, left their convents, and revisioned their lives to serve the needs of the real world of our time.

I do not claim so great an achievement for our own Beatitudes community, but in the eyes of the official Catholic church, we, too, would probably qualify as a bunch of “prodigal daughters and sons,” an offshoot that has ventured beyond the parental estate.

To the extent that current church leaders criticize us, I would contend, they speak not for God, but for the elder brother.

Jesus leaves his parable open-ended, leaving room for a possible reconciliation of the whole family, including both siblings. Let us all devoutly hope and pray for such a fresh start, a new beginning, at a banquet at which all our brothers and sisters are welcome.