

## Lent IV

Cycle C, 3.27.22

Joshua 5:9, 10-12/ 2 Corinthians 5:17-21/

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

### **SATISFYING THE HUNGER OF THE HUMAN HEART**

*But here I am, dying from hunger.*

That's the realization that brought the younger son back to his senses. Hunger motivated him to leave home in the first place. The story doesn't fill in any details, but we can surmise, take a guess. We are told he was the "younger son." My temptation is to judge him from the get go Impetuous. Careless. Demanding. So selfish that he broke cultural norms and demanded his share of the inheritance before his father died, effectively wishing his father were dead. I suppose I could be less judgmental.



Maybe he was hungry for adventure, bored at home, wanting to see the world of far-off lands, wanting more out of life than being a homebody or a supervisor on his father's farm. Who can blame him? How many of us have left family and hometown behind in New Jersey or Tennessee or Toledo to move west and seek new horizons? greater opportunities? greater freedom?

Now, with his funds depleted, his life a mess, his adventure failed and his future looking bleak, he concocts a story to tell his father in the hopes that he can get back into the old man's good graces. There I go again, issuing a harsh judgment against the kid,

suspecting the worst of him. Maybe his repentance was genuine. Maybe the pious speech he composed while he was mired in the pig sty was a sincere expression that he wanted to be different, to be a part of the family and community again. Maybe he had his heart set on getting his act together and realizing that he had to change. If hunger was the motivating force for the younger son's leaving home, it was also hunger that brought him back – a hunger for wholeness and true happiness, for togetherness and, ultimately, for love.

## **HEART HUNGERS**

Bishop Robert Morneau names five basic hungers of the human heart: The first, he says, is for **meaning in life** – our search for the answer to the question: *What's it all about?* The second hunger is for **commitment** – someone or something to commit our lives to; giving our talents and energies to something worthwhile. Our third hunger is for **depth and quality in life**, those deeper encounters with God, with others and with ourselves. **"Wholeness"** is the fourth hunger. We have all been broken in some way, like the prodigal son, and we yearn for healing and wholeness. The fifth hunger is for **intimacy**. We are made for oneness, for communion, yet we often suffer from loneliness and isolation. Our heart seeks closeness to God and to others.

Yesterday I sat with a couple parishioners who helped to organize and coordinate the Synod listening sessions the past three weeks which were opportunities for parishioners to hear from one another the important things on their minds and

hearts. We were reviewing the many responses from the eleven sessions in order to prepare the report that will be sent to the Diocesan office which will, in turn, prepare the Diocesan-wide report to Pope Francis. Eighty-two parishioners participated and, not surprisingly, seventy of participants were 50 years and older. All participants were asked the same questions: *What are some of the things you are facing in life right now that you hope the Church will accompany you in? How do you see yourself sharing in the work of being Christ's life and love in the world? What are the joys and obstacles you experience in your life in the Church?*

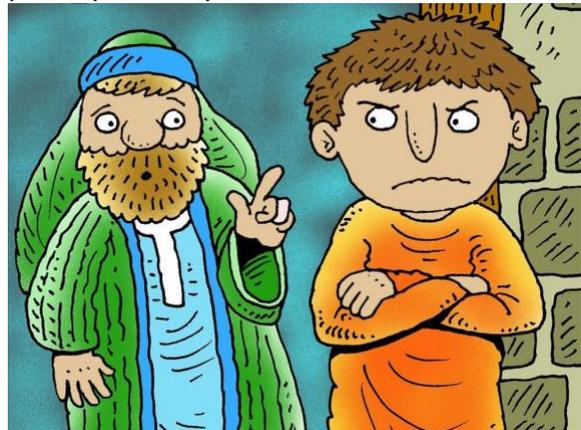


Synod  
2021  
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For a synodal Church  
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As I read the responses I couldn't help but picture our gospel scene of the father and his two sons, the run-away younger brother and the stay-at-home older brother. So many of the responses revealed hungers deeply satisfied by life in the Church and yet many unfulfilled hungers were revealed. The agonizing concerns of older parishioners have to do with their children and grandchildren. The Church has become irrelevant to a younger generation. Clericalism – the misuse and overextension of authority by male clergy and hierarchy -- and the lack of accountability on the part of bishops don't resonate with younger people's experience of society and the world they inhabit. A Church that still operates like a medieval monarchy is out of touch to them. As one participant said: *Many bishops of the U.S. operate in a silo, have the wrong priorities, have become politicized and*

*judgmental, not pastoral or prophetic, which is what the times call for.* Youth long to experience a Church that is more compassionate and accepting of people on the margins: the divorced Catholic whose marriage has fallen apart, of gay and lesbian members, especially LGBTQ youth who experience rejection and exclusion, of transgender persons who hunger for understanding and support. There was overwhelming concern about the exclusion of women, not from participation in the life of the Church – we know there would be no Church were it not for the dedication of women, but from official roles of leadership and decision-making, including ordained priestly ministry.



We older members, unlike like the older brother in the gospel story, need to rejoice over the one who returns and not scoff or scold or refuse to join in the father's feasting. We have been fed by the sacraments and the scriptures, the joy of community, meaningful service to others, especially the poor. Yet we ache for those who cannot find in the Church what we "older brothers and sisters" have found. We need to call the "younger son and daughter" home. As Sr. Wendy Beckett wrote, *Future Christianity is generating itself from the lives of those who have fled to the margins.* As I listened to the Synod session responses, the image of the father in gospel became for me

an image of the dream I have for the Church. The father, in his vast, unorthodox wisdom, understood. He didn't hold the younger son back. He didn't decide what his journey should look like. He loved him so much, he let him go. What did he know that I refuse to know? That the son couldn't return home without leaving first? That he couldn't taste resurrection without dying? That maybe lostness is part of the deal — the prelude to the most magnificent finding? Can it be that we, too, need to know such hunger — know it on the tongue, in the gut, like a fire in our bones — before we can savor the feast?



When we return to the Father's embrace everything changes. As one Synod participant said about her joy in being Church: *One becomes a new creation in Christ, every fiber transformed.*

The Prodigal father is an image of God for us — arms open wide, ready to run to bring his child back home. God understands better than we do what one writer said: *Despite frequent comments about secularization in Western society and a decrease in Church membership, there is widespread evidence of a hunger for the spiritual. The interest in spirituality is certainly not confined to church-goers or those commonly identified as religious people.* My own hope and dream is that we who are here, who strive to be Church in spite of its flaws, can represent to others the image of God in today's powerful parable -- the father who understood. What a remarkable thing that is — his deep and patient comprehension of how life and desire actually work. He respected the hunger that pulled the younger son

away. He knew a wiser, sharper hunger would bring him home. St. Augustine said it centuries ago in the confessional book of his own renegade young life: *Our hearts are restless, Lord, and they will not rest until they rest in you alone.* We can change his word "restless" to the word "hungry." *Our hearts are hungry, Lord. Only you can satisfy our deepest hungers.* One of the synod responders stated her dream this way: *The best testament to our faith is what we do in the secular world outside our church community; we need to be more active in living our beliefs there.* May we be what St. Paul calls us today: *Ambassadors for Christ*, offering an assuring invitation to anyone and everyone: *Be reconciled to God.*



*John Kasper, OFS*