

## Homily for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of LENT [C] (March 30-2025): *Laetare Sunday*

Readings:- Jos 5:9a, 10-12; II Cor 5:17-21; Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

**My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ;**

Traditionally, the Fourth Sunday of Lent is called *Laetare Sunday* (Rejoice Sunday). Anticipating Easter joy, today's readings invite us to rejoice by being reconciled with God through repentance and the confession of our sins and by celebrating our coming home to be with our loving and forgiving God.

**This man has never been forgiven:—** In pioneer days, a regiment of American soldiers was stationed in an Indian territory. Life was rough and dangerous. One soldier was repeatedly charged with drunkenness. Once again, he stood before the staff for court-martial. *"What can I do with you?"* asked the colonel in charge. *"You have been punished time and again, yet here you are once more. We have tried everything. What can be done?"* *"May I look at the man's record, sir,"* inquired a young captain. After examining the culprit's record, the young captain announced eagerly: *"There is one thing that has never been done to this man."* *"What is that?"* Demanded the colonel. *"Sir,"* said the captain, *"this man has never been forgiven."* After a few minutes with his staff, the colonel turned to the accused. *"You have been punished many times. This time I wipe the charge off your record. You are forgiven; you are free."* At first surprised, the culprit dropped his face in his hands, and with heaving shoulders left the court. From that moment he was a different man. Never again he was drunk. On the contrary, he became one of the most trusted soldiers in the regiment and rose steadily in rank. — This is like the story of the prodigal son in today's Gospel which is really is the story of the merciful father. You and I are in the story. We are the wayward sons and daughters. We have been wandering children, disobedient soldiers of Christ, selfish children of an all-kind Heavenly Father. Let us show our gratitude to our loving and forgiving and merciful Father by returning to His home, remain His loyal children, and not hurt Him again by our sins. (Msgr. Arthur Tonne).

**A summary of the Important lessons from the readings of the day:-** In the first reading, the Chosen People of God are portrayed as celebrating, for the first time in their own land, the feast of their freedom, by using wheat that had grown in the Promised Land. In today's Responsorial Psalm (Ps

34), a rejoicing Psalmist invites us, “*Glorify the Lord with me; let us together extol His Name!*” In the second reading, St. Paul invites the Corinthian Christian community to rejoice because Jesus has reconciled them with God by his suffering and death.

Today’s Gospel celebrates the joy of the prodigal son on his “*homecoming*” where he discovers his father’s forgiving and overflowing love. It is also the story of the joy of a loving and forgiving father who celebrates the return of his prodigal son by throwing a big party in his honour, a banquet celebrating the reconciliation of the son with his father, his family, his community, and his God. At the same time, in his self-righteous elder brother’s angry reaction to the prodigal’s return, Jesus invites us to avoid self-righteousness and self-justification by imitating the repentant younger brother. Let us admit the truth that we are an assembly of repentant, sinful people, who are now ready to receive God’s forgiveness, to experience Jesus’ Personal Presence in the Holy Eucharist as our loving and forgiving God and so to love and forgive each other making, generous and lasting peace.

**Important messages for personal application:-** 1) **Let us return to our Heavenly Father with repentant hearts:** As prodigal children, we face spiritual famine all around us in the form of drug and alcohol abuse, fraud and theft in the workplace, murders, abortions and violence, pornography, premarital sex, marital infidelity, and priestly infidelity, as well as in hostility between and among people. All of these evils have proliferated because we have been squandering God’s abundant blessings, not only in our country and in our families, but also in our personal lives. Hence, let us repent and return to our Heavenly Father’s home.

2) **Holy Mass enhances our “pass over,”** from a world of sin to a world of reconciliation. At every Mass, we come to our loving Heavenly Father’s house as prodigal children acknowledging that we have sinned (“*I confess to Almighty God*”). In the Offertory, we give ourselves back to the Father, and this is the moment of our surrendering our sinful lives to God our Father. At the consecration, we hear God’s invitation through Jesus: “... *this is My Body, which will be given up for you... this is the chalice of My Blood ... which will be poured out for you...*” (= “*All I have is yours*”). In Holy Communion, we participate in the banquet of reconciliation, thus restoring our full relationship with God and our fellow human beings.

**JOKES OF THE WEEK:** # 1: Sad at prodigal's return: The Sunday School teacher was explaining the story of the Prodigal Son to his class, clearly emphasizing the resentment the older brother expressed at the return of his brother. When he finished telling the story, he asked the class, *"Now who was really sad that the prodigal son had come home?"* After a few minutes of silence, one little boy raised his hand and confidently stated, *"The fatted calf."*

**# 2: Letter from Prodigal Son?** *Dear folks, I feel miserable because I have to keep writing for money. I feel ashamed and unhappy to have to ask for another hundred, but every cell in my body rebels. I beg on bended knee that you forgive me. Your son, Marvin. P.S. I felt so terrible I ran after the mailman who picked this up in the box at the corner. I wanted to take this letter and burn it. I prayed that I could get it back. But it was too late."* A few days later Marvin received a letter from his father. It said, *"Your prayers were answered. Your letter never came!"*

**Gospel exegesis: The significance of the parable:** The parable of the prodigal son is called *"the greatest short story in the world"* (Charles Dickens), *"the gospel of the gospels"*, *"the gospel of the outcasts,"* and the *"parable of the prodigal father"* (because the father is generous, excessive, and extravagant with his love, and because the Father's prodigal love finds its completion in Jesus Christ). But the popular name, parable of the prodigal son, fails to indicate that the father has two lost sons, not one. The world-famous portrait of the *"Return of the Prodigal Son"* by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch artist Rembrandt (**Rembrandt** Harmenszoon **van Rijn**, July 15, 1606 – October 4, 1669; Wikipedia), now at the Hermitage museum in Russia; Balanchine's famous choreography of this parable; the Russian composer Prokofiev's suite based on the Prodigal Son; and numerous other artistic works around the world, depict this theme, demonstrating the lingering impact of this parable on human hearts down through the centuries. Acknowledging the allegation that he mingled with the sinners, Jesus outlines the three aspects or dimensions of repentance, by presenting three characters in this parable: 1) the repentant younger son, 2) the forgiving father and 3) the self-justifying elder son. This is a double-edged parable. The lesson of Divine mercy to sinners is shown by the Father's reception of the returned younger son. A stern warning is given to the self-righteous people through the dialogue between the father and his angered, older son.

**The repentant son:** He began by wanting freedom from his father. Hence, he forced his father to give him his right to one-third of his father's property (as stipulated in Dt 21:17). The son then sold his property and travelled to a far-off city where he realized all his wild dreams of a carefree life. Finally, bankrupt, abandoned by his "friends," and faced with a local famine, he was forced to take up the job of feeding pigs – a job forbidden to the Jews. At last, awakened by his sufferings, he "came to his senses" and gathered enough courage to return to his father to confess his sin, thus becoming the model for repentant sinners. He had resolved to become a "*hired servant*" of his family, thereby regaining a measure of honor and independence, but with a social status matching his guilt and failure. Moreover, he would be able to take care of his father for as long as the father lived.

**The prodigal father:** The father in the story represents God the Father. According to the law and customs in ancient Palestine, a father could dispose of his property by making a will that would be executed when he died (Nm 36:7-9), or he could give his possessions to his children while he was still alive. Usually, the eldest son received a double share or twice the amount that each of the other sons would receive. In this parable, the father promptly gave the younger son the one-third share of his property due to the younger son, bid him a tearful farewell and waited daily, watching for the rebel's return. Meanwhile, the younger squandered his heritage, in loose living among a dissolute crowd who dropped him once his money was gone. One of the crowd sent him to his farm to care for the pigs, an occupation forbidden to Jewish people, but apparently made no provision for food and clothing. In rags, the youngster repented, returned to his father's house and there confessed his sins. His father promptly forgave him, kissed him on the cheeks, and healed the broken relationship between them. He ordered a bath for his son, gave him new garments (a sign of honour) and a golden signet ring (sign of authority and trust). By ordering sandals for the feet of his son, the father signalled his acceptance of the returned penitent as his son. The robe and ring and shoes were a sign that the son would not be received into the house as a *servant* (slaves did not wear shoes, robes or finger rings) but in his former status as *son*. The killing of the fatted calf, specially raised for the Passover feast, meant that the entire village was invited for the grand party given in the returned son's honour. When the elder brother refused to join in the party, the father went out to beg him to be reconciled with his younger brother and to share in the father's joy. The father assured the elder son of his continuing love and of the son's secure inheritance and place in the family



by saying, *"All I have is yours."* Thus, the father symbolizes the loving and unconditionally forgiving Heavenly Father who is excessive, extravagant, and generous with His loving forgiveness and mercy. The reconciliation of the prodigal son with the prodigal father is celebrated in the form of a grand banquet. Mirroring our Heavenly Father, Jesus, too, squanders his love on those who need it most. Although the story of the prodigal son is often given as an example of repentance, it is actually the story of how God forgives and heals the repentant sinner. Like God, the father in the parable was ready to forgive both of his "sinful" sons even before they repented. St. Thomas Aquinas explains that God already forgives us as soon as we repent, even before we go to confession or perform any penance. The forgiveness the father offers in the parable parallels the forgiveness God offers in real life. That is why Jesus in the Gospels frequently describes God more like a defence attorney than a prosecuting attorney. Let us not ration God's mercy, because He is a "prodigal" lover (CCC #2845). Nor should we ever judge another as unworthy of our forgiveness or of God's mercy, because all love is unconditional (CCC #2843, 44). When we frown at the actions and words of the Scribes and Pharisees as we read scripture, are we really frowning at ourselves? Lent is a good time to adjust our attitudes and actions, with a good examination of conscience. The story is told about how someone asked Abraham Lincoln how he was going to deal with the rebellious southerners when in the aftermath of defeat, they returned to the Union of the United States. Lincoln responded to the inquiry by saying, ***"I will treat them as if they had never been away."***

**The self-justifying elder son:** The unforgiving elder son represents the self-righteous Pharisees. He had no feelings of sympathy for his brother. He played the part of a dutiful son, but his heart was not in it. He was resentful, bitter, and angry. He was so jealous of his younger brother that he never wanted to see him again. He levelled a series of allegations against his prodigal brother, whom he viewed as a rival. Instead of honouring his father by joining him in accepting his brother and playing an appropriate role at the meal, the elder son publicly insulted and humiliated his father (vv. 28-30). Jesus includes this character in the story to represent the scribes and Pharisees "who began to complain, saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" We are not told how the elder son responded to his father's plea, or to his father's assurances of continued love, place and inheritance (*"All I have is yours"*). Perhaps that is because Jesus meant the scribes and Pharisees to see that their own final response to the Father's love in sending Jesus had yet to be made,

and that they still had time to “*return home*” to their Father in welcoming Him.

**Additional Anecdotes:-01 Prodigal son’s prodigal father:** The son was a rebel, a college drop-out, a carouser, and a partyer. He smoked, he drank Johnnie-Walker, he was a brawler, and had more run-ins with the law than you would care to count. By his own admission, he was the quintessential prodigal son. Following his 1974 conversion experience, he lived as a committed Christian and was ordained by Grace Community Church (Tempe, Arizona), in 1982. Now he carries on the evangelizing work of the most respected, admired, and perhaps famous American of the Twentieth Century, the late Billy Graham (born November 7, 1918, Charlotte, NC; died February 21, 2018, Montreat, NC). His name is **Franklin Graham**. Today Franklin Graham not only has a tremendous benevolent ministry called *The Samaritan Purse*, and has met needs all over the world, but he is now preaching the Gospel just as his Dad did, to thousands and thousands of people. He is where he is today because he had a father who made sure the door was always open.

**02) Prodigal girl December’s return:** Many years ago, comedian Chonda Pierce met a young woman named December. December’s father was a pastor. December got the message early on that pastor’s children are supposed to be perfect. December knew she would never be good enough for the people at Church. So December began rebelling against her family’s and her Church’s expectations. By her late teens, she was living on the streets. She spent her nights partying, sleeping with any man who caught her eye. Sometimes, she would slip into her parents’ Church during the service, but she always left before anyone could talk to her. After she became pregnant, December decided to return to her parents. She expected shame and condemnation. Instead, December’s parents welcomed her back with open arms. — As she says, “*The bottom line is that I came back to my family and God because they love me with no strings attached. They forgave me. . . I thought I could do something to make them disown me, but I was wrong.*” [Chonda Pierce, *It’s Always Darkest Before the Fun Comes Up* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 80-84.].

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