Though We Sometimes Wander, God is Always There For Us

Blessings to you on this “Laetare Sunday” as we rejoice as Easter is now 3 weeks away, but also rejoice in God’s mercy as we think about this weeks story of the Prodigal Son.

Though it can be never emphasized enough, this week’s familiar story of the Prodigal Son reminds us of how deep God’s mercy is, and of how His love is unconditional. It also challenges us to be open to receiving it, but also to understand what His love is all about - a gift freely given, not earned, and part of a relationship we have with our God

A few years ago, a young man, Carlos Adrian Vazquez, Jr. from California, received a letter from Pope Francis. Carlos, who was about to turn 18, was serving 11 years for manslaughter.

His problems started as a child. He was a frequent fighter, and dropped out of school at the age of 15 and joined a gang. He wouldn’t go home for days and weeks and lost connection with his family. Eventually, he was in a gang fight and held responsible for a death.

His family was devastated, and when he began the sentence, he was crushed. He lost the will to live. But through prison ministry, he began to have hope. The Jesuits minister to the juvenile facility he is in. Carlos would initially get into a lot of fights, but changed. His parents visited him, and this brought him comfort. And he started reading articles about the pope, and saw that the holy father had a special place in his heart for inmates, and this began to deepen his faith even more. And so he wrote the pope a letter. In it, he wrote:

"If only the world were filled with more love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy. Being an outcast of society, I want the world to see us for who we truly are; human beings, who make mistakes like everybody else. But we are able to rise again like a Phoenix," the youth wrote the Pope. "I will become a leader some day, like Cesar Chavez, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and Malala Yousafzai. Thank you for your loving and your merciful example to all of us.”

The pope wrote back:

“Dear Carlos, May the peace of Jesus Christ be with you! I was pleased to receive your recent letter.

I pray that as you and your fellow residents celebrate the opening of the Holy Door (referring to a special door of mercy that was given to the juvenile facility) you may receive these gifts and be filled with peace and hope. Know that the Holy Father is thinking of you and praying for you. And please remember to pray for me, because I greatly need your prayers.”

Carlos says the letter filled him with hope, as even though 9 years remained on his sentence, he had a new attitude. He says he learned from his actions, and also wrote a letter seeking forgiveness from the victim's family.

The power of mercy. What was needed was a light in the darkness. So often as life goes on, we can just gradually drift away from our faith. The message this week in our Gospel with the familiar parable is that love is a free gift from God - and in both brothers, there is so much to relate to.

We begin with the younger brother. Note that he refers to himself multiple times: "father give *me* the share of your estate that should come to *me*." Like the younger brother, we too can sometimes be selfish, and this gets us lost. But that's not how God operates. We can't possess more of God's love than someone else.

And what happens when he tries to hold onto it for himself? We are told that he goes off into a "big and empty space." This is what happens when we take the gifts God gives us, and distance ourselves rom God.

Having lost it all, he hires himself to tend to pigs - an unclean animal for a Jewish person - and he's hit rock bottom. It's here that he finally comes to his senses. He realizes there is a way out, and it's to reach out to his father. And so what we see is at this point sorrow and contrition. It's a key moment, because while God loves us, we have to make the step towards him and realize our sinfulness. When he does this, we get a glimpse into the heart of the father. We are told the father "caught sight of him" while he was still "a long way off." See how the father is looking, hoping that he will return? Then, as he comes closer, the father runs to his son. The younger son barely gets a word out, and he is embraced with the love of the father.

It's such a beautiful image, and I think one of the reasons that no matter how often we hear this story, it speaks to us in a new way. The point is like the younger brother, we get lost. He did not intend to lose it all; and he probably wasn't even thinking about how he was treating his father by asking for his inheritance while his father was still alive. He was oblivious to how sin had taken over his life. But when he lost it all, his eyes were opened. When we look at the younger brother, the challenge for us is to have our eyes opened too. To not wallow in shame, but to realize that sometimes we are sinners. And just like the younger son, sometimes we don't even see it. All we have to do is to say "I'm sorry," and "forgive me." But we have to realize that we need forgiveness.

The older brother is the most tragic person in this story. He doesn't see anything wrong with how he leads his life. Note his attitude. He is angry that his brother returned and has gotten a party. He refuses to enter the house, and his attitude to his father is one of resentment. "Look, all these years I served *you* and not once did I disobey *your* orders…but when *your* son returns who swallowed up *your* property, for him *you* slaughter the fattened calf." The sadness is he just doesn't get it. For him, it's as if the father owes him something. He just doesn't get that the love his father has for him is there too. But again, it goes back to trying to own God's love, or see it as proportional.

We can compare ourselves to others, and it's tempting to think we aren't as bad as someone else, or we do more than someone else, so God in turn then owes us more. If for us religion is about just not doing some things and doing others, or fulfilling obligations, then we've got a problem. The father tells his older son that everything he has is his - and note that the father goes out to meet the older son where he is at too. Just as we have to ask ourselves how we have gotten lost and ask for forgiveness, we also need to ask ourselves how we are like the older brother - viewing our religion as a matter of doing our duty and nothing more. We need to be honest with ourselves, and ask ourselves if we look down on others, those returning to the faith, or those we judge as being not "Catholic enough." Faith is not just a matter of the head - knowing the catechism, the parts of the Mass, etc. Faith is a matter of the heart.

God's love is so amazing. Our challenge is to open our eyes and recognize our need for it, because in our lives, there's a little of the younger brother - a gradual drift into darkness, and sometimes a bit of the older brother - a holier-than-thou attitude that looks at God as if he owes us something so long as we toe the line. What God gives us though in mercy is such a great gift. It takes us out of the emptiness, and brings us back to life. May we open our hearts to accept this gift, and let the love of God be the robe to cover us and the ring on our finger, realizing that God's love sets us free.

God Bless,

Fr. Paul