

## *Septuagesima Sunday*

*Texts:* St. Matt. xx. 1. 1 Cor. ix. 24.

“Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”

In a recent interview, a well known director of motion pictures was asked what he thought was the formula for success was with great movies. After thinking for a moment, he answered that “the bad guy got it in the end.”

There is a human desire in us to see that those who we think deserve to be punished are eventually brought to justice. It brings closure for us in the trials that we have been through or the trials that they have put others through. Think of the fascination we had with the execution of Saddam Hussein or the last days of Hitler. How many evil men have brought nothing but misery into the world and in our view deserved what they finally got.

That is true in our own lives. We are often wronged or mistreated and our first instinct is to perhaps exact revenge. Certainly we find satisfaction when a person seemingly finally gets their due.

Yet for us as Christians, Christ’s message is often contrary to our human nature. While the parable in our Gospel lesson talks about the wages paid for those who begin their efforts early and always live in Christ and those who come later in life receiving the same measure of salvation, perhaps a more defining story is that of the Prodigal Son.

The Gospel of the Prodigal Son is perhaps one of the best known in scripture. There are two clear messages that come out of this passage. Here is a man with two sons whom he loves, one who faithful and loyal and the other who just wants to enjoy life and have a good time. Both have the inheritance of their father but one squanders it and finds himself destitute and starving. In that despair, he comes back to his father and begs

forgiveness and is accepted back with open arms by his father who rejoices at his return.

But the other son gets really upset. “I have been faithful to you, did what you asked, lived by your rules and what have you done for me?” “Yet when this bum of a brother of mine come s back after wasting all of his inheritance-what do you do, you throw a great party and welcome him with open arms. Its just not fair!”

The first message speaks to us of God’s unfailing love for us. The son who has squandered all that he was given, sinned and found himself in the pit of despair, turns in his desperation to his father, crying out in his hunger and in recognition of how he has betrayed his father and wasted what was given him. He comes to his father and cries that he is unworthy to be called his son-“Make me one of your hired servants” he declares recognizing that all that his sin against his father was great. But what does his father do but welcome him home, puts new clothes on him and celebrates in his return.

Here is one of the paramount lessons in scripture about our relationship with our Lord. St. Paul’s writes: “I am convinced that neither death nor life....nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39). Our Lord and Savior tells us clearly that His love for us is unfailing, that no matter how we sin, or how we turn from Him, that He is always there for us ready to take us back, to open His arms to us. That love for us can be unfathomable. How is it that our God can accept those who sin and are unfaithful in this manner? This is so difficult for us to get our arms around but it is something we need only accept in our faith. God will still love us no matter what. And if there is any doubt in your mind about that, think about our Lord hanging on the cross for us. Picture the nails piercing His hands, the hole in His side, the blood covered body. Whipped and beaten, scourged and spit upon, insulted and forced through the streets to walk to His death among those He had healed, blessed and fed, His torn and ripped body was nailed to the tree and He was hung high for all to despise and mock as he suffocated and bled to death. Yet, in all of that-He looked to our Father in Heaven and said “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

And in this parable is a second important message. The good son, the faithful son, the loyal son, the son who worked in the fields and did what he

had been told gets angry. “What is it you have done for me?” he asks. I have been loyal and faithful and yet I should welcome that no good brother of mine home?

So what does this good son expect of his father? He stands in judgment of his brother and demands an explanation. He wonders if all his faithfulness has been meaningless. And what does his father tell him. “Son, you are ever with me, and all that I have is yours. But we should rejoice for your brother who was dead is alive again, he was lost and now he is found.” Judging is part of human nature, and it is a sin as it is contrary to what God asks of us.

It is often difficult for us to understand the depth of God’s love for us, but it is even more difficult for us to be an example of that love for others. In our lives, in our families, in our workplaces and even in our church, we are asked to open our arms to those who have wronged us as we strive to imitate Christ’s love for us. No matter how grave the sin, or how deep the wound, when those we know turn back to reconcile with us, or reconcile with God, are we not turning from God if we do not open our hearts and our love to them?

And when we ask the question “what about us-after all we have been faithful?” He responds, “All that I have is yours, but rejoice for your brother who was dead is alive again, he was lost and now he is found.”

It is our sinful nature that prevents us from imitating our Lord and doing what He asks of us. It is our human nature to hold grudges, to judge, to want to exact some tribute from those who have sinned against us. But that is not what we are directed to do by our Lord. In our unworthiness, we were given the gift of eternal life, salvation and unlimited love by a God who never fails us. No matter what our sin, no matter what depth of despair we reach, He is there for us, willing and able to accept us back in our repentance. If this is the love He has for us, can we show anything less to each other? In His message today, let us remember that “All that He has is ours and that we are to rejoice when those who have been lost are now found.”

There is also a message here for our church. In many denominations the faithful have been led astray and they are praying for guidance and for direction as they seek answers to what is going on around them. In some

cases they feel abandoned by their fellow Christians and the church that they grew up with. In their looking for answers, they are sometimes led to our door, to the doors of parishes like ours that struggle to stand up for the faith in a world that has secularized religion and put man at the center of God's church. And when they come through our door, we must follow the example that the Lord gives us in today's Gospel. "He ran to his son and threw his arms around him and kissed him."

In the struggle to make sense of what is going on around us and in our own lives, we turn to our Father and cry for help. He reaches out to us and holds us in His arms and welcomes us back, time and time again—"Not 7 times, but 7 times 70". It is a depth of love for us we cannot fully understand at times, a depth of love that was demonstrated in our Lord's sacrifice on the cross. As He died for us and opens His heart to us with compassion, let us turn to him with confidence that He will always welcome us back and then turn to each other in the imitation of His love for us and welcome those who have come to Him with that same measure of love.

"KNOW ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible."

We should strive at all times to do God's work and to put our trust and faith totally in Him. In that, it does not matter if someone comes to the Lord early in life or in the last moments of existence. What matters is that they open the door to Christ and receive the full measure of what He has to give us, even if it takes them a lifetime to figure it out.

"All that I have is yours, but rejoice for your brother who was dead is alive again, he was lost and now he is found." Think of the wonderful gift we all share by having God in our lives. Think of all the joy, peace and comfort we have all experienced. It is so sad when someone struggles though life with no hope, yet even if they finally reach out for God's hand in their last moments, we should be overjoyed as the "angels in heaven are at the repentance of one sinner."

Truly for us, our work in His name is to share that message of hope with the world. Let us rejoice when those who are lost come through our doors and

let us embrace them with the love of Christ in the same way He stretched out His arms to embrace us, on the wood of the cross.

“AND NOW TO GOD THE FATHER, GOD THE SON AND GOD THE HOLY GHOST, BE ASCRIBED, AS MOST JUSTLY DUE, ALL MIGHT, MAJESTY, DOMINION, POWER AND GLORY FROM HENCEFORTH AND FOR EVERMORE. AMEN”

Rev. Mr. Jeffrey Monroe