

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Josiah 5, 9-12 □ Psalm 34 □ 2 Corinthians 5, 17-21 □ Luke 15, 1-3, 11-32

March 6, 2016 at Holy Spirit Church in Mustang, OK

Waiting. It is well past bed time for Mom and Dad, but sleep is out of the question. Their 16 year old son is out with friends. Curfew is eleven, and they know he will be in on time. Sure enough the door slams exactly at eleven. Coming into the living room, he says, "Why did you wait up?" Trying to be cool, they say "We weren't waiting up – we just wanted to see the end of this movie." Then it's off to bed for everyone, home and family once again complete and at peace.

Mom and Dad wait. The angry words still resonate in the house. In time, this storm too will pass, like hundreds of others have that rock the family. It will blow over. Until then, Mom and Dad put aside their heartbreak and get ready to be forgiving and welcoming parents when the angry son or the put-upon daughter returns because that's what you do when you are Mom and Dad.

Wait. Everything has been a blur since that phone call: she was crossing the street on her way home and a car came out of nowhere. The driver never saw her. Someone called 911 and....after hours of surgery, they sit by a hospital bed. Their precious daughter hooked up to a wall of blinking monitors, and for the time being, this small hospital room is home, and they wait.

The love of a parent for a child is a remarkable thing. Children have no idea how much their parents do and would do for them: while many good parents never realize what that love enables them to do. They just do it, and so it is easy to tell this story again from Luke's Gospel. We understand it. We know what it means, and what it suggests to us about a God Jesus taught us to call, "Father."

Yet, at the same time, it is not easy to tell this story, because there is no peace in that house as the story concludes. The reconciliation is incomplete, and while the father may have one of his sons back alive, another stands outside angry, refusing to even call his father by that name and refers to his brother as, "That son of yours." What could be a joyful story of a family united in peace is really a sad reflection on the present condition of the human family broken and angry, envious, greedy, and prideful.

When the characters are removed from the parable, it chronicles the struggle between virtue and vice that goes on within every one of us. The struggle is made all the worse by a confusion within us over values and virtues. Understanding the difference and putting them in the right order provides the insight and wisdom to see virtue victorious over vice. Virtues and Values are not the same thing. Confusing them is not helpful for those who want to grow wise and holy. Confusing them is a formula for personal, spiritual, and social disorder. A virtue is behavior that makes me good. A value is something I want. Virtue speaks to morality. Value has nothing to do with morality. Morality is about what I do with my values. For example, money is value. It is not good nor bad. I can use it to support my family, or buy drugs. I can use it to do good things or bad things. Only my behavior is good or bad when it is consistent with virtue. Values are relative. \$50 is a lot of money. \$500 is a greater value, but virtues are absolute. Kindness is always good. Patience is always good. Justice is always good. When we confuse these two, values often are often placed ahead of virtues. For example, our culture often places freedom, which is a value, ahead of responsibility, which is a virtue which can be a disaster, because freedom is not a virtue. It does not make us good. Responsibility does.

The boys in this parable are good examples of Virtue and Value face to face. The older son has a lot of values, working hard, doing what is expected of him, but there is no virtue in him. As he stands there proclaiming his values, there is nothing really good about him, and none of us would want to be like him. He is arrogant, mean, proud, and very much alone. Then there is the other one whom I always like to think of in terms of virtue. He has one no one can miss, and it is probably the most important one of all: humility. That virtue makes him good again, and if you would have to choose which of the two you would want as a friend, I hope you would choose the younger one. He would be good to have around. He is wise, humble, and loving.

Tonight, Monday, and Tuesday evenings here at Holy Spirit, I have come to spend a little time with you reflecting upon virtues and vices. Whether or not such a reflection is of value to you remains to be seen, but I would like to propose that as we move through the last days of this Lenten season, it might be valuable to do something with the time we have left. I am going to speak about what our church tradition has for centuries called: "The Seven Deadly Sins." These vices that make us miserable and continue to leave the human family broken and alienated. Lots of people these days don't like to talk about or hear about "sin." Many may insist that they have "issues"; but hardly does anyone like to say they have

“sins.” Yet when recently asked by a reporter who he was, Pope Francis without a pause said: “I am a sinner”, and with those four words, he unmasked the lie and the denial with which we stumble through life blaming and accusing others for the choices we make every day.

It will do no good however to simply list the vice or the sin or the “issue” if you want to pretend. What we need is to learn, understand, and practice the virtue that will, when embraced, will lift us up, restore the human goodness and glory for which we were made in God’s image. I’m going to talk about those virtues each night and contrast them to the vice and the sin their absence allows to wound and fester the human soul. Pride and Envy tonight. Anger and Sloth Monday, and Greed, Gluttony, and Lust on Tuesday. I always save the best till last. So I invite you come for an hour or so to pray, reflect on the Word of God, and learn to cultivate real virtues that will eventually, if we wait long enough, and God is patient with us will get the party started with everyone in the house.

Fr. Thomas Boyer