

24th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, CYCLE C

Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14 + Psalm 51 + 1 Timothy 1: 12-17 + Luke 15: 1-32

Holy Spirit Catholic Church: September 11, 2016

The two sons in this popular parable have forgotten who they are.

The younger son and the older son are both lost because they are living, not as sons, but as servants of their Father.

Their merciful Father, who is the central and most important figure in the parable, goes out to both of them, to meet them where they are, and to remind them who they are.

This passionate Father does everything possible to shake his boys out of their amnesia and remind them of their identity---you are my son, always, no matter how far you wander away from home, no matter how lost you are even if you stay home.

The younger son, who has squandered his father's inheritance and sunk so low that he longs for the food the pigs are eating, decides to go home, but not as a son of his father, but as a hired worker.

Stuck in the muck of his misery, he comes to his senses one day and turns back toward home, longing for the food his father's servants receive for their labor.

He goes home hoping to simply to be treated as a hired hand, but his father will have none of this nonsense.

His father, waiting every day for some sign of his lost son's return, sprints out to meet him with a huge embrace and showers kisses upon his son.

Upon hearing his son's plea, "*I no longer deserve to be called your son*" the father's reply is immediate and emphatic, leaving no room for doubt about what he thinks.

Robe, ring, and sandals are given to remind the youngest in his family of who he is—always his father's son, no matter what.

A feast is prepared to celebrate the homecoming of the younger son, as his father and the whole household rejoice in the return of his son.

Well, almost the whole household, for the eldest son refuses to enter the feast. He remains outside his father's house, in the darkness, the darkness of resentment and bitterness. He, too, has forgotten who he is.

In fact, for a long time the eldest has been living with the attitude of a hired hand, slaving away, thinking he can earn his father's love, forgetting that his father loves him for who he is as his son.

The merciful father, who goes out to embrace his younger, lost son and welcome him home, also goes out, filled with compassion, to his older son, lost in the darkness. Only to hear harsh words from this son, who does not think nor act like a son, "*Look, all these years I served you....*" Notice he never once uses the word, "Father", but instead says over and over again, "you."

Here is another son who thinks he is a servant.

Who, because he thinks he must slave away to please his father, even disowns his own brother with the words, "*but when your son returns who swallowed up your property....*"

He has to be reminded of a truth which he has forgotten, that as his father's son, everything the father has is his. Everything.

He is invited out of the darkness into the light, out of resentment into rejoicing, out of his false identity to claim his true identity as his father's beloved son.

Pope Francis, during this Year of Mercy, keeps reminding us of the truth which pulses through this parable---the name of God is mercy.

God's name is mercy, and like the merciful father in this famous parable, God seeks us out wherever we are lost, lost because we have forgotten who we are and who God is.

There are those who feel lost because they have squandered the life God has given them, they have wasted their life in sinful ways, who do not feel worthy to be called God's son or God's daughter.

Or they may stay away from their Father's house, rejecting their dignity as a child of God, because of the sins of others done unto them, because of hurts inflicted upon them which have left deep wounds. These "lost ones" think that who they are is all tied up in their pain.

But when those who have lost their way come to their senses, when they take the first step home back to their Father's house, the God who is mercy rushes out to meet them, overflowing with compassion, reminding them of something they can never lose, their identity as His beloved son or as His beloved daughter.

I have personally witnessed the power of God's mercy at work in such a powerful way in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, as one who had been lost is found in the embrace of God's mercy, and their life "starts" over.

But there are also those who are lost who come regularly to their Father's house, who may sit inside their Father's house but who are not really here as beloved children.

Those who have kept the rules, who have slaved away at trying to do what is right, who for many years have tried to please a Father who they mistakenly think is harsh and hard-hearted.

These “lost” ones have forgotten who they are---beloved sons and daughters of God—and they have forgotten that everything the Father has is theirs---light and joy and peace and abundant life.

These “lost ones” fail to enter into the rejoicing that is part and parcel of being in the Father’s house---they do not sing, they do not smile, they do not act as if they are loved by a merciful Father.

But the God who is Mercy keeps going out to these “lost” sons and daughters of his, trying to break through the resistance of self-righteousness, the fortress of resentment.

God never gives up, the merciful Father will not rest, until all his children are seated at the banquet table in his house, rejoicing in His bountiful love.

Jesus is the face of the Father’s mercy.

Jesus, the beloved Son of the Father, reveals to us the mercy of our heavenly Father.

The Son of God, by becoming fully human, teaches us that every single person is worth the effort of finding and bringing to his Father’s house.

Every single one he died for, every single one he gave his life for, every single one is of eternal value.

As Jesus welcomes we who are sinners and eats with us today, we are intimately joined to Him who has love has transformed us into beloved sons and daughters of God.

He sends us forth from His Father’s House into a world where many have lost their way, because they have forgotten who they are.

We are to remind them that even when they feel lost, they are never lost to God.

Fr. Joseph A. Jacobi