

Pray More Lenten Retreat - Transcript

The Prodigal Son

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Let us pray. Lord, we thank You for the gift of our lives. You are the source of all love, of all mercy and forgiveness. Lord, in this season of Lent, this season of conversion, where we turn our hearts and minds back toward You in a deep and personal way, we ask You to allow us to be open to receiving Your Holy Spirit, that may move us into deeper communion with You; to turn away from everything that separates us from Your love, to have the courage to fight boldly and courageously against the forces of the culture that want to put us and our sins and our need for self-gratification before Your merciful love for us. Lord, help us to keep our priorities always focused on You as the heart and the center and the soul of our being and existence. And we ask this in the precious and holy name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Between my second and third years of graduate school, I had the opportunity to study theology in Rome. All expenses were covered except for the airfare, which I couldn't afford. That was back in the days when my wife and I were a young couple, kind of newly-married, and we were still... we didn't have kids yet. We were still kind of struggling, you know. And so I asked my mom for the money. And when I told my mom what I was planning to do she gladly gave me the airfare that I needed. However, a day or two before purchasing the ticket, I received a phone call from my mom informing me that my younger brother was in jail and was in serious danger of losing custody of his son, and that I was to send my airfare that she just sent to me so that he could get out of jail.

Well that news didn't sit well with me, and I was sorely disappointed. I reminded my mother that I was the one who was nicknamed "Mr. Responsible." See, my parents are divorced, and I helped my mom to raise our family when I was younger. And so my mom was a cardiac care unit nurse who worked on the graveyard shift. She would come home, and by 7... she got off work at 7 o' clock, and it would take her about 10 minutes to get home. I had to make sure that my siblings were up, and teeth were brushed, lunches were made, backpacks were ready, so when she honked the horn we would come outside, jump in the car, and she'd take us to school. And then she'd come home, get a few hours of sleep, get up and make dinner. We'd come home from school, we'd eat dinner together, and she'd go back to bed. Then I took over. I had to make sure the kitchen was clean, I had to make sure homework was done, I had to make sure things were put away, took messages, that everybody brushed their teeth and went to bed on time. And,

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most important, I had to make sure my mom didn't sleep through her alarm, so that she wouldn't be late for work. So they nicknamed me "Mr. Responsible."

I also reminded my mom that I was the one who became an Eagle Scout. I was the one who left the monastery - in my early twenties I was discerning a vocation to the Benedictines, and as I was living in the monastery my mom got sick and almost died, and I left to take care of her and my sister while she recovered from open-heart surgery. I reminded her that I was the first person in the history of our family ever to go to college, and to receive an academic scholarship to the University of Notre Dame no less, and now had the opportunity of a lifetime to study theology in Rome. I was the one who spent most of my life putting others first and myself second.

I also reminded my mom that my brother had dropped out of high school. That he joined the Navy, but then subsequently quit the Navy. That he had three children from three different women, and never really put forth an effort to be a father to any of them. He was the one who, throughout his entire life, only thought of himself. I told my mom that maybe this was an opportunity for my brother to realize the seriousness of life, and that this imprisonment might be a sign from God and the key to turning his life around. My mother listened patiently to my plea and then, in the end, made the decision that any mother would: She told me how proud she was of me, how much she loved me, and then ordered me to send the money. But what hurt me more than not going to Rome was that I didn't even get so much as a thank you or any acknowledgement whatsoever from my brother of the sacrifice that was made for him.

How many parallels in our own lives can be found in the story of The Prodigal Son. The parable of The Prodigal Son is about sin and forgiveness, yet we often don't like to hear about or talk about sin because it's so personal. Sin makes us uncomfortable. Sin embarrasses us. Sin opens deep wounds that are often painful. If talking about sin bothers you, then I invite you to please look at the cross. Jesus took all of our sins upon Himself. He was uncomfortable. He was embarrassed. His body endured deep wounds that were painful. Jesus took our sins personally. He is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and there is nothing that we can ever do, there is no sin too great, there is no hurt too deep that cannot be forgiven by the rich mercy and healing power of God's life-giving love.

In that wonderful gospel parable of The Prodigal Son, we hear that the younger son asked his father to give him the share of his estate. Now, you have to understand how disrespectful this was, because when do you often get the inheritance? When your parent dies. This young man did not have enough respect for his father to even wait until his father died to ask for the share of his inheritance. God has also

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given each one of us a share in His estate in His inheritance. God, in His infinite wisdom, knowing that we are made in His image and likeness, has given us life. He has given us the fullness of truth in His Son, and He has poured out upon us and within us the gift of the Holy Spirit. He has also given us the church, the body of Christ. He has invited us into intimate and life-giving communion with Him.

The younger son goes off and squanders his inheritance freely, spending everything. Committing sin does not mean that we're bad people because, after all, in Genesis God creates man and woman and says that they are very good. The truth is that sin means that we are human, that we make mistakes, sometimes really scary, big, messy mistakes, and that we are still dealing with the effects of The Fall, of Original Sin. We, within our hearts, we desire and are attracted to truth, and goodness, and beauty, but at the same time we are inclined towards sin. Sin occurs when we freely choose to put us first and God second. That was the lie of the garden, when Satan tricked Eve, "You will not die." And the word there in Hebrew, "Maveth", means to cut yourself off from God's life. "By sinning and choosing yourself over God," Satan tells her, "you will not die, you will not cut yourself off from God. In fact, you will be like God." Which of course didn't happen, because he lied to her.

Sin occurs when we choose to put us first and God second. When we think we know more than God. When we think that we're God. Sin occurs when we live according to the dictates of the culture, not according to God's truth, where Christ is at the heart and the center and the core of all of our actions and decisions. It's like the spoke of a wheel. That hub, that core, that center is relationship with Christ. And all of the spokes, all of the decisions, the actions that we make in our life flow from that center, from that core, and it supports the rest of the wheel. That's our life in Christ. All of us have sinned to some degree or another. We are the ones who Jesus died for.

And after the younger son spent everything, a famine struck. And he found himself in dire need, supporting himself by tending swine. Now, you have to understand how powerful that image was that Jesus told in that parable. Remember from the dietary laws from the book of Numbers that they were not, the Jewish people were not allowed to eat shellfish, or fish that eat off of the sea floor - like, for example, catfish, things like that - and they, of course, could not eat pork. But here's the thing. It wasn't that he was just with the pork and he desired to eat the pork. He desired to eat what the pigs ate. And what do pigs eat? Slop. Garbage.

And that's what was filling his soul, that slop and that garbage of sin that he was mired in for so very long. Serious sin empties us of God's life, and creates a famine, a desert, a chasm, a void within us. We wallow in the pig pen of

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overindulgence and self-gratification. We hit bottom. This is the point when we realize that we are not the center of the universe, and we finally begin to start to find answers to the question “Is this all there is? Is this the meaning of life?”

Often when parents ask me what can they do for their children who are mired in addiction, maybe to alcohol or drugs, and they’re in and out of rehab, in and out of jail, in and out of court. I tell them to “Pray for your child’s Prodigal Son experience. For the pig pen experience. Now, they’ve reached many lows, but they’ve not yet reached the pig pen. Pray for them to get there.” Now, it may be painful for you as a parent to see that, your child go through that, but it’s only from that experience, when they hit rock bottom, when they finally come to realize that the way they’ve been living is not working. And the only person they can turn to that will make any difference in their life is the living God. That’s when they start to turn their whole lives around, like the Prodigal Son who finally comes to his senses and acknowledges his sinfulness.

This is often the most difficult part of the journey of forgiveness: Admitting that we are wrong. As hard as it may be, we have to lift up our cross and follow Jesus. If we follow Christ’s example and allow ourselves to be open and vulnerable before the Father, who is rich in mercy, we can evoke in the soul a movement toward conversion in order to redeem it and set it on a course toward reconciliation with our Heavenly Father. Our response to God’s love and mercy must be that of The Prodigal Son: Recognition of our sinfulness, humility before the Father, and conversion of the heart, the mind, and the will.

Humility doesn’t mean thinking less of ourselves; it means thinking of ourselves less. And when we think of ourselves less, we empty ourselves and make room for God to work in our lives. The younger son decides that when he meets his father he’s going to confess his sins. “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and against you.” We also go to our father, the priest. Those who approach the sacrament of reconciliation obtain pardon from God’s mercy for the offences committed against Him. This is why the son doesn’t just pray to God to have his sins forgiven; he goes to his father, just as we go to our father, our priests.

Priestly absolution refers to the fact that Christ entrusted the exercise of the power of absolution to the 12 apostles whom He charged with the ministry of reconciliation. In John’s gospel, John 20 verse 19, we read that Jesus said to them on the day of the resurrection - they were in the upper room, the doors locked - Jesus comes in their midst and says “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I send You.” And when He said this, He breathed on them and said “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

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Why is that important? The only one that creates anything in the bible is God. The word “Bara” in Hebrew means to create. The only one who creates anything is God. There’s only twice that God creates by breathing: In Genesis chapter 2 God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being; and here in John chapter 20: God breathed the life into man, and man became alive. And God is breathing that same Holy Spirit that would come down upon them in Pentecost, the same Holy Spirit that transforms bread and wine into God. That same Holy Spirit, He gives that to the apostles and empowers them and says “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

God, of course, remains the principal agent in the forgiveness of sins. God is forgiving the sin, of course, through the priests. He now acts through ministers chosen and authorized by Himself. Why? See, God no longer wanted to be far away from us. He no longer wanted to speak through prophets and great men and women of the bible. So as John tells us in the prologue of his gospel, the word became flesh and dwelt among us, because He wanted to touch us with His own hands and love us with His own heart. And He still does that today through the ministry of the priesthood, of fathers, of our church family. Who still, Christ uses them to love with His own heart, touches us with His love and mercy that they give us in that beautiful sacrament of God’s mercy and reconciliation.

In that incredible sacrament, the priest is the tool and the instrument that God has chosen to use for our help, for our salvation. Here is the best part of The Prodigal Son’s story, at least for me. It says when he’s still a long way off, when the son finally makes the decision to turn back toward the father, he’s already rehearsed what he’s going to say to his father. When he’s still a long way off, the father catches sight of him, which means what? The father was looking for him the whole time. The father never stopped looking for his son, and the same thing is true for us. God never abandons us, no matter how deep we are in our sin, no matter how far we think we are away from where we should be in our relationship with God. He is there waiting for us.

And notice, the father just doesn’t stand there and wait for his son to reach him. No, the father runs to embrace his son, and God wants to do the same thing for each and every one of us. When we come to Him in love, in humility, in that sacrament of reconciliation, He is running to meet us. We don’t have to wait until we feel close enough to God to turn back to Him and ask for forgiveness. We don’t have to wait for the right time, we just start to need heading in the right direction, just a little way, and the Lord will run to meet us with His grace, with His love, with His mercy, with His truth.

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Finally, the father says to his eldest son, who is jealous, you know, “Wait a minute, this guy spends all your money, and I’m here working hard with you every day. You don’t even give me a party for my friends and yet you throw a party for him? What’s up with that?” What does the father say to his faithful son? “Your brother was dead, cut off from my life, and now he’s come back to life again. He was lost, and now has been found.”

Well, several years ago I attended my high school reunion in Newark, New Jersey, and when my brother found out I was coming home he absolutely insisted that I stay with him. He picked me up at the airport, we drove back to his apartment, and he had just purchased a brand new bed for me. He’s a bachelor, never been married, lives by himself, and he bought a bed because he knew I was coming. He had a hot breakfast ready and waiting for me every morning, he gave me unlimited use of his very nice car, SUV, he now had a very demanding and responsible job at which he excelled, he now took great care and loving concern for his children, making sure that they got to see and meet their uncle and spend time with him when I was in town.

We stayed up early in the morning, like three in the morning most nights, playing guitars, and talking, and watching action adventure movies, just like we did when we were kids. You know, I was deeply impressed with the change that had occurred in my brother’s life. I was proud of him. And I asked him “What made the difference?” He looked at me with a face that I had never seen from him before and he said “I know how important that trip to Rome was to you, and I wanted to show you that the money didn’t go to waste.” The Prodigal Son had come home. Let us pray.

Lord God and Father, we thank You for the gift of the incredible sacrament of reconciliation. The sacrament of Your endless mercy and love, where we receive forgiveness and healing. Lord, we ask You to open our hearts to a deeper reception of Your love and Your will in our own lives. Help us to have the courage to turn away from all of those things that pollute our hearts, that leave us in that pig pen. Let us, through Your Holy Spirit, in accord with Your holy will, freely choose to turn back toward You, realizing that it’s only through You that we will find the joy and the peace and the fulfillment that our hearts so long and yearn for. Help us to cooperate with the grace of that incredible sacrament, to always stay focused on You, always putting You first in our lives as the center of everything that we do, every action and decision that we make. Keep us strong in Your love. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.