

TRINITY 9-ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL
The Prodigal Son

8 Aug. 2004

Text: Luke 15: 2

From a God who's unfailing love for us is continually demonstrated in His willingness to accept us back, I bring you greetings in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

As most of you are aware, I was a professional seafarer for many years. Sailors are a unique lot, spending most of their time in steel boxes on the rolling sea, working hard, fighting the elements, dealing with loneliness and facing death on a regular basis. Those long stretches are often interrupted by less than exotic ports-of-call when as soon as the gangway is set, they run ashore looking for a phone to call home, perhaps a cool drink of lemonade and of course a church. Well, my memories may be a little foggy on this point but one thing I do remember is the nature of seaman. There is an old myth that seagulls are the reincarnated souls of sailors. All you have to do is watch one to see if that maybe true or not. They love to squawk, which is the number one pastime at sea. They love to eat, which is the number two favorite pastime at sea and they love to-well just don't stand under one after they have eaten.

Aboard ship there is a ritual just a few days before you arrive in port. The officers gather in the wheelhouse to get the latest word from the office about who will be joining the ship at the next port and whose sentence has been commuted. Part of that ritual involves the pontification of each of the officers about who is coming back and what trials we will face with each of them. Each person pronounces judgment about the prospective new crewman and how we will have to keep a weather eye on him lest we all go to a watery grave.

Judging is part of human nature, and it can be a sin if it is contrary to what God asks of us. Our Epistle this morning warns us that God was not pleased with those who lived under the law due to their sin. In particular we are told that we should not be tempted to think of ourselves better than others. But in our trials to confront our sinful lives, we are given a lifeline from our savior.

This morning's 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!"

There are two critical messages here that the Lord imparts to us. 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, take a moment to look up at the cross this morning when you come forward for communion. Look at 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 bother who was dead is alive again, he was lost and now he is found."

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 in our imitation of Christ's love for us, and not to judge. 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. “We have been faithful Lord-what about us?”

“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 back to Him with that same measure of love.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, it is often so difficult for us to understand your unfailing love. Strengthen our faith that we may always turn to you in our sin and our despair. May we always be an example of that love to others and always rejoice when our brothers and sisters return to us, to your church, to your love. Help us to understand that in your love for us, that you are always ready to take us back and may we never turn from those who turn from you and may we strive to be examples of your love and caring for us as a witness to our faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

