

4<sup>th</sup> Sun of Lent – C  
March 14, 2010 – Holy Angels Church  
Homilist: Rev. Roland M. LaPlante  
Readings: Jos 5:9a,10-12; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Lk 15:1-3,11-32

**DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST:** Have you ever had a family celebration that was ruined by an argument? Everything was going along fine, and then something was said by one relative that offended another relative. There was anger, tears, hurt feelings...and the rest of the meal was eaten in silence.

That's exactly what happened in our Gospel reading for today. It's a familiar story...most of you have heard it so many times before that you could probably do a good job telling it from memory yourselves. But it might be helpful in this homily for me to say something about the **character** of the three people involved.

Let's begin with the younger son. Wild and reckless, he certainly wasn't a particularly attractive young man. When he left home, it wasn't because of some innocent desire to see the world...such as college students sometimes propose after graduating. No, he wanted to live his

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own kind of life, free from the restraints of family eyes and religious morals. He also wasn't prepared to wait until his father died before receiving his inheritance...he wanted it now. In other words, give me my money, and the two of us can call it quits forever.

You might wonder why the father agreed to this. He must have known where such recklessness would lead. Wouldn't it have been better to withhold the money and thereby force his son to stay home until he matured a little? Yet, there's wisdom in what the father did. If he held his son home against his will, the son, considering his temperament, might have turned into a bitter prisoner. How then would he ever have learned that his father loved him, or how would he ever have learned to love his father in return? It was better to let him go. Love can't be forced.

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What happened next was quite predictable. He spent the money, lost his so-called new friends and ended up tending pigs, because there were no other jobs available. So, coming to his senses after a long stretch of this kind of loneliness and hunger, he decided to return home. As Jesus told the story, it's hard to tell if he regretted hurting his father, or if he wanted to return home only because he realized the pigs were eating better than he was. Maybe his father would hire him as a laborer, he thought...at least then he'd have something to eat and a bunk to sleep in.

That brings us to the father. He could have refused to take him in, or he could have taken him in on the terms his younger son was suggesting... that is, as a hired hand. Who would have blamed him if he stopped at that point?

But the father wasn't built that way. He ran to his son while he was still a distance from the house. He greeted him with hugs and kisses,

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showered him with gifts, and declared a holiday. This is certainly not what the son expected. What did he ever do to deserve so loving a father? I suspect, that's when he finally understood and felt remorse.

The elder son is a different breed from his brother...but no prize either. It's hard to imagine how such a father could have sired such an ungracious pair. This second son was cold, vindictive, and loveless. He was like some of the Pharisees who objected because Jesus would often be in the company of sinners.

On hearing the music and learning that his runaway brother had returned to a hero's welcome, the elder son stayed away in a deep sulk. So, the father came out to him, too, and pleaded with him to join the party.

You know how some people keep petty resentments bottled up within themselves for years, then finally explode with anger? That's what this

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son did. He poured out his resentments...he whined about the unfairness of it all...he spoke of working like a slave...a word that finally gave him away. The father had never treated him like a slave. But he felt like one...with no more affection for his father than a slave for his master. A son works for this father out of love; the elder son worked, but never got the point.

Yet, even with this son, petty as he was, the father acted with love. He pleaded with him to be like himself...open, generous, forgiving. “My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.”

Clearly, the starring role in this little drama belongs to the father...so loving, so selfless, so willing to forgive. Jesus is saying to us...this is how your Father in heaven is. He forgets the past completely if we will

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only return to him. Our motives don't even have to be all that pure...as the younger son's motives may now have been. God will accept us and work with us where we are. He just wants a chance to show us what his grace can do with us, even if WE are only partially converted...even if OUR motives are not totally pure.

Today has always been called “Laetare” or “Rejoice” Sunday because of the opening antiphon of the Mass, which says: “Rejoice, Jerusalem! Be glad for her, you who love her...” How fitting, therefore, for the Church to choose this beautiful parable of God's generosity as our Gospel reading for today. Would there ever be a better reason to rejoice than the great love the Father has for us?

I want to tell you about another young man whose story is somewhat similar to today's Prodigal Son. He was Catholic to start with but admits that he wasn't a very good one. His father was a government

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official and this young man enjoyed the comforts of those who were well off. He described himself at sixteen as a scatterbrained youth who had “turned away from God and didn’t keep his commandments.”

He was kidnapped and sold as a slave and made to work on a farm for six years. During that period, because of his suffering and loneliness, he began to turn to God and rely on his help. He eventually escaped and God miraculously protected him until he found his way back home.

Like the prodigal, he came home a new person. Although his parents wanted to keep him at home with them, his love for God led him to want to serve God as a priest. Even more than serving as a priest, his love for others led him to want to return to the people who captured and enslaved him and teach them about God. And that he did.

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After overcoming many obstacles, including his lack of education and social graces, he returned as a bishop to the people who had enslaved him. Once he arrived he wasn't greeted with open arms, however. In his own words, he said "daily I expect either murder, or robbery, or enslavement." He writes elsewhere that "they seized me with my companions. And on that day they most eagerly desired to kill me; but my time had not yet come. And everything they found with us they plundered, and myself they bound in chains." He feared nothing, for even if he were to be put to death, he felt that would have been the supreme act of love for God.

But God had other intentions for him. For thirty years he served God and the people who once enslaved him and his work was blessed. He ordained many bishops and priests, established convents, monasteries and schools, and in thirty years saw the conversion of almost all of

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Ireland. And of course you all know I've been talking about St. Patrick, whose feast day occurs this coming Wednesday.

For those who are Irish and who honor Patrick, the best way to truly honor him isn't by drinking a Guinness...although there's nothing wrong with having a beer. But better, we should respond to his example and his call to holiness. Again, quoting Patrick "strengthen and confirm your faith...That will be my glory, for a wise son is the glory of his father."

And even if you're not Irish, we all owe a great debt to the Irish for their help in restoring the faith in Europe many years ago when it was being overrun with barbarians; and for their witness to the faith in modern times. God Bless St. Patrick! God bless us as WE struggle to imitate his devotion to Christ.

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