

## The Sunday of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15: 11-32

February 16, 2014

Today's Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the Christian world's great treasures. Some have even speculated that if we lost all of the teachings of Jesus, and had only this single parable, we would still know the very heart of his message. St. Symeon the New Theologian compares the teachings of Jesus to a treasure chest of precious jewels. Surely one of the most brilliant of these jewels is the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The original occasion of telling this parable might be likened to the "setting" of a special gem that exists to enhance the natural beauty of the stone. In this case, the setting is a confrontation between Jesus and certain scribes & pharisees, Jewish religious leaders, who criticized him for associating with sinners. According to St. Luke, Jesus responds to their criticism with, not one, but three parables. The first is the Parable of the Lost Sheep. The second is the Parable of the Lost Coin and the third is what we hear in today's gospel, the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The essential message of all three of these parables is that God is not really interested in dealing with us in a stern fashion, much less in humiliating us. God's interest is in receiving us, embracing us, blessing us and rejoicing with us. In Jesus' teaching, repentance is connected not with gloom but with joy. God loves us and rejoices in our repentance with the same joy that the shepherd knows when he finds his lost sheep, the woman knows when she finds her lost money and the father knows when he sees his lost son returning to his home.

Jesus is teaching people a profoundly new way to think about their relationship with God. These three parables are a direct challenge and refutation of the moralistic thinking of the Jewish elders who believe and teach that God only loves the righteous and hates sinners.

Although it is called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the central and most attractive figure in the story is, surely, the father. His love for his two sons is unconditional. In his love, the father reaches out to do everything in his power for their benefit, without violating their personal freedom. There is nothing that either son could do that would make him stop loving them.

This is good because, as we see, both sons are going to be difficult, although difficult in different ways. They are, also, broadly representative of two basic “types” of people. Types that are found in every society. In the first place we find the “older sons” who, for one reason or another, find it agreeable and advantageous to themselves to live within the structures of whatever moral/ethical code forms the basis of their culture or at least to appear to do so. These are the “respectable” people.

Then there are the younger sons, those who, again for many varied reasons, find themselves in such overt slavery to their sins that their lives are like a trainwreck of dependency, dissipation and disorder. In most societies, such people are, commonly, shunned and disparaged by the righteous number one sons. For a rabbi to socialize with such people was, in the eyes of “respectable” people, a mockery and insult to the respect due their community standards.

Now Jesus has been teaching that one of the purposes of His Ministry is to proclaim the accessibility of God’s Kingdom through repentance. Part of His job is to help “bring people to their senses”. The primary thrust of this parable of God’s Goodness and love for all, and especially, the reason for the seemingly disconnected and unresolved account of the number one son, is an attempt to bring the elders to their senses so that they might find the joy of repentance. As long as they see themselves as righteous, without need of repentance they will continue to despise others, as we saw last week with the Pharisee and the Publican. Not only that, but their anger over what they perceive as God’s injustice in being merciful to the more obvious sinner will keep them outside the Father’s House, even refusing to come in.

Jesus is not just challenging their attitudes and behavior. First and foremost, He is challenging their theology, their understanding of what God is like. As I mentioned earlier, they believed that God only loved the righteous, those that kept the Law in all its particulars. The righteous were to be rewarded, in this life, with success, wealth, good health and the respect of the community. Sinners were to be punished with failure, poverty, sickness and disrespect. Read the book of Job. This theology forms the background for the whole book. This theology continues to be taught and believed in a variety of semi-Christian sects even today. Sadly, there are even many Orthodox Christians who, from ignorance, still tend to think this way about God.

The Church reads this Parable as part of its preparation for Great Lent. It sees in the prodigal and in the compassionate love of the father, a guide and inspiration towards true repentance. We are encouraged to identify with the younger son and this is fairly easy for most of us to do.

I would like to suggest that we all take a good look at ourselves in the light of what is revealed by the older son's behavior and our awareness that this parable was originally directed at him. Christian communities are, after all, largely made up of "respectable" people. Most of us have our more visible passions under some measure of control. We may have, without really noticing it, become the dutiful number one son. Take a look. There is a lot of good food for thought here.

Next week, the Sunday of the Last Judgement, will help us look even more deeply into this matter and with God's Help, continue our preparation for our Lenten journey.