

Fourth Sunday of Lent (Laetare Sunday) March 30-31, 2019

This Fourth Sunday of Lent, called “Laetare” Sunday, is Latin meaning “to Rejoice”, and it’s the reason we wear these bright “rose” vestments. We rejoice because we have made it halfway through Lent! We rejoice because we know that Jesus died for us and He is raised from the dead for us. But we still need to maintain the spirit of Lent, strengthen ourselves for the ultimate week of Lent, Holy Week. So the theme in our readings today is one of assurance. These readings should make us aware we are still sinful humans, and we are still called to grow in faithfulness and love.

Our Gospel today is the famous and well-loved Parable of the Prodigal Son. We should first set the scene for this parable in the ministry of Jesus. So far in his ministry, Jesus has been preaching the good news of the kingdom, and He has been calling sinners to repentance, so they can receive forgiveness for their sins. So the people following Jesus are not always what we would call the cream of the crop. Jesus has been reaching out to the least - and the lost.

He’s actually been calling the people whom the Pharisees are looking down on. For example, even Matthew, one of Jesus’ apostles was a tax collector, which was an occupation that was widely looked down on. But these sinners realized how lost they were, and Jesus offered them a way to come back to God. So sinners were now flocking to Jesus, for they knew that’s where they could find forgiveness and restoration. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’”

So all of this sets up the story we hear today, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We all know how it starts. The dad has two sons, and the younger of the two demands his share of the inheritance – and he wants it now. That is actually equivalent to saying, “Dad, I wish you were dead. I want what’s coming to me!” So very disrespectful, and disgracing the family in front of the entire community. The father would have every right to punish this son for his outrageous behavior. But he doesn’t. He lets the younger son have his share of the estate, and off the son goes, leaving home to go on his own to a far away country. At first, things seem to go well. It’s all fun and games. He’s running through the money like it’s going out of style. The Gospel says, “He squandered his property in reckless living.” And that’s where “prodigal” comes in, because it means “spending money or resources recklessly.” So this is why we call him the “prodigal” son. But as we know, the story goes on, and the resources start to run out. The young man is reduced and humbled, and he has to take a job feeding the pigs, which is about as low as you can go.

But he starts to come to his senses, and remembers the goodness of his father: “If I only can get back there, things will be better. Even the servants back home are doing better than this! But wait! After I have disgraced my father and been so disrespectful to him, how can I ever show my face there again?” But he knows his father is kind and generous, so he takes a chance, and heads back home. But even before he gets there, and he’s still a long ways off, his father who has been waiting for him to come back, sees the boy, and he goes running out to meet him and embrace him! He showers him with affection! He wants his son back. “Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is he alive again; he was lost, and now is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” This parable is a picture of how God welcomes us back. He showers his love and his grace on us, and we surely don’t deserve it. But Christ went to the cross for us, so that our sins would be forgiven. God wants us back as his child, so we can call on him as dear children would ask their dear father.

But what about the older son, the one who didn’t leave home. He is resentful and jealous of all the attention the younger son is getting. So again the father does something amazing. He goes out to this son too, and he’s patient with him, even though the older son is dishonoring his father and despising his brother. The older son’s attitude is actually much like that of the scribes and the Pharisees who are grumbling against God, and

complaining how Jesus is receiving sinners and eating with them. But we do know God has restored us, and for that we should be eternally grateful.

So Lent is now half over. And hopefully it has been a fruitful season so far, as a time of repentance and renewal. Each of us, in our own way, is asking for healing, mercy, and reconciliation with our God. For we certainly all need it. None of us can live without it, because forgiveness is at the heart of being made whole again. So we should forever be grateful that we believe in a God who continually gives us chance after chance to be the people he created us to be. So the message of reconciliation we receive today is ours to announce to the world. The only way to do it, the only way for people to know that God loves them and forgives them, is not by telling them, but rather, by being a forgiving people ourselves. So, as we heard in this parable today, we just need to ask God for forgiveness for our sins to get back in his good graces, and then we need to forgive others, like Jesus forgives us.