

## 34th Sunday After Pentecost

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I. Today, we heard the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This parable is the second of four Sundays preparing us for Great Lent. It is a parable rich with imagery. There is one image, however, that overshadows the rest – and that image is the father’s embrace of his son when he returns from his exploits. I thought that today we would spend a few minutes reflecting on that embrace because it speaks to the kind of heart this father has.

II. How might we expect the father to respond when his son returns? We might expect anger or a rejection of his son. After all, the son left the father with the most hurtful words a father could ever hear. He said: “Give me the part of the inheritance that is mine.” In reality, he was saying: “I can’t wait any

longer for you to die. I want what belongs to me now.” You and I can’t imagine how hurtful and offensive this demand was to the ears of the father. The son’s demand was a total rejection of everything the father represented; a rejection of his home; a rejection of his father’s love and care. But the father doesn’t respond in kind. He doesn’t meet rejection with rejection.

III. We might expect the father to treat his son with indifference. We can almost hear him say: “So, you’re back. Don’t expect anything more from me. I’ll put up with you, but don’t expect any special treatment. I going to treat you like the low-life you have become. Check in with my steward – he’ll find a job for you, but no longer are you welcome in my home.” We don’t find this spirit in the father’s heart either.

IV. Instead, what we find in the heart of the father is different. It is counterintuitive and illogical. We imagine the father looking out his window each day – looking down the long road that led away from the homestead and toward the “far country.” We can imagine the father hoping to see the figure of his son in the distance returning home. We can imagine the father checking off each day on the calendar since his son had left. Our imagination is not that far stretched because the Gospel tells us that when the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and he ran with purpose to meet him and clasped him in his arms and kissed him. Here, in the image of the father’s embrace, we find infinite compassion, unconditional love, and everlasting forgiveness. Here, sin and forgiveness embrace. The father’s love is not a stifling or suffocating love. His love

does not force nor is it manipulative. It is not controlling, nor does it seek revenge. The father's love offers the son the freedom to reject love or to love in return. Love is only authentic when it is given and received in freedom. The father's embrace is the greatest expression of unconditional love. If the son had no inkling that his father's love was like that, he would have never returned. And if that wasn't enough, the father's love restored the son to his rightful place in the home. The father tells his servants: "Quick, give my son the robe that had once adorned him; the ring that showed his stature; and the sandals that showed his dignity." There is no time to waste – vest him. I am always reminded of this each time I vest in my priestly baptismal garment before every Liturgy and pray the prayer: "My soul shall rejoice in the Lord, because he clothed me with the garment

of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of gladness; as a bridegroom He has set a crown on me; and as a bride adorns herself with jewels, so He has adorned me." Every time I vest using those words, I realize, my friends, that despite my horrible sins, my Father still loves me.

VI. The point of Jesus' parable is this is how God, our heavenly father, loves us. He wants only to offer a love that can be freely received. All of our sins certainly pierce His heart. We too are in a "far country" when we honor Him with our lips, while our hearts are far from Him. We too are in a far country when we prefer and wallow in our passions, lusts, resentments, jealousies, and desire for revenge. His grief over our sins is so deep because His heart is so pure. One of my favorite writers, Henri Nouwen, wrote: "This is the God I believe in: a Father who, from the beginning of

creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessings, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms embrace them. His holy desire is to bless.”

VI. This is the heavenly Father that I believe in also. This is the heavenly Father that I hope you believe in. He is the One to Whom I wish to return. One of the saints said: “Take one step towards God, and He will take ten steps towards you.”

VII. The father’s embrace – it is an irresistible image. (TAKE A MOMENT TO LOOK AT IT IN TODAY’S BULLETIN.) It’s an image that should be ever present with us and that we should nurture regularly. And it is an image that forces me to ask myself - am I worth looking for? Do I believe that

there is a real desire in the heart of God to simply be with me? This Gospel, this embrace, tells me – YES! If I believe this, then let me take the first steps towards being embraced by Him. Great Lent will be a very different experience for us if THIS IMAGE is the one that motivates us, instead of the boring question – WHAT AM I GOING TO GIVE UP THIS LENT? May Our Father's love melt away in my heart all coldness, indifference, and sin. And may this Fatherly embrace restore me to my former beauty. Amen.