

Homily for the 4th Sunday in Lent

March 30-31, 2019

Readings: Joshua 5: 9a, 10-12; 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21; Luke 15: 1-2, 11-32

Preacher: Sr. Barbara Moore

This is the third in a series of parables Jesus shared about themes such as forgiveness and things lost and found. A lost sheep, a coin and a son, who is a subject in today's Gospel.

It is an interesting task to explore this last parable through the lens of an Orthodox Jew who teaches New Testament. Her name is Amy-Jill Levine and she teaches at Vanderbilt. My point is that throughout Christian history we have interpreted this parable told by a Jew through Christian lenses, centuries after it was shared. And that is fine because beautiful lessons can be drawn from the story. But it is also interesting to imagine how a 1st century Jew heard this story from Jesus' lips. In this task, Levine is an enormous help.

We see a father equally sharing inheritances with both sons. One misused the money and other did not feel appreciated. The older son appears to refuse the father's invitation and did not come into the party. The early Church suggested that the elder son was the unrepentant Jewish people who rejected Christ. But that interpretation has in many ways, lead to antisemitism in the Christian Church.

But what did the Jewish audience hear when Jesus told this story? What can we learn from them? Perhaps the opening lines of the Gospel that introduce the three parables give us a clue. Luke begins by saying that tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus and that the religious leaders were complaining that, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus' listeners knew tax collectors and "sinners" who, in the minds and experiences of many, did not share with the community, took advantage of them, or were working for Rome. That is

why they were a problem. Yet this Jewish Rabbi welcomed them and ate with them. This is a powerful introduction to the parables. It is a message of inclusion.

Amy-Jill Levine raises questions about the elder son. In Jewish custom, often the elder son received more of the inheritance but in this case, it was equally divided. It also appears that the elder son was not on the scene when his brother came home and thus was not aware or sought out for the party. One senses his long-held resentment toward both his brother and his father. “All these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders....” To add to the listeners’ reactions was their knowledge of a custom called *kezazeh*, which, because of shame, rejected a child like the younger son. Brian Pierce in his book, *Jesus and the Prodigal Son*, writes that *kezazeh* was a ceremony that humiliated a son who wasted his resources among Gentiles. There are so many underlying issues in this story.

This family in the parable has money, land and servants, but each son has his own problems. Each one shamed the father. One escapes and wastes his inheritance and one stays, holds resentments and feels unappreciated. In many ways this family on some level, reminds us of our own families or families we know. I often wonder how the son’s mother would have tried to settle these events?

As you can see there are many lessons here. Yes, the inclusion by Jesus of those others did not trust. Yes, a lesson in forgiveness. Yes, a warning that some in our families feel unappreciated. Yes, the negative long-term effects of anger and resentment. Yes, the need to avoid any interpretation of such a story as anti-semitic.

Some call this the parable of the “prodigal” father. A man “wasteful” in his love and embrace. A loving, forgiving man who must have suffered and was shamed by both sons. A loving God who makes efforts to meet us as we journey, who forgives and shows “radical mercy” as you and I often wander off to a “distant country” or refuse to accept the compassion that God shows to those who differ from us or whom we judge and condemn. A compassionate God who calls us to avoid exclusion and to welcome those who are on the margins. By welcome I mean work with, pray with, act with, speak with—and trying to understand those often ignored by others.

Henri Nouwen wrote, "*The Return of The Prodigal Son*;" its cover shows the portrait of the son's return painted by Rembrandt. There is the father embracing the younger son; the older son standing at a distance and two others in the background. What has struck me about the portrait are the father's hands. When one looks closely one sees that they are different. One hand is clearly male and other, female.

Our gracious God welcomes us, forgives us, and includes us as the artist does. This in our day, our culture and context is a challenge for all of us.