

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, 18.iii.2007, 10:00 a.m. EDT  
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania  
Holy Eucharist, WOV Setting 5  
Joshua 5:9-12, Psalm32 ,II Corinthians 5:16-21, Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32



Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

**"There was a man who had two sons."**

**--Luke 15:11b**

A funny response to the Pharisees' sneering judgment, this story. Jesus could have told them a thing or two about the company they kept at their tables, about the sinners they were in their hearts. But, instead, Our Lord told them a story, just a story. It not meant to be story about a real event, but rather about something that *could* have happened. Couldn't it have?

Well, perhaps so, theoretically, but there are some elements in the story of the father with a good and faithful son and another, 'prodigal' son as we say, so as not to say what is really meant.

I have been doing some of the homework given me about four years ago by Pastor Claude Baublitz, of blessed memory. That homework is to read everything written by the Catholic priest and mystic, Henri Nouwen, beginning with Nouwen's little book *The Prodigal*. Nouwen had become fascinated with Rembrandt van Rhijn's painting depicting this parable, the one Rembrandt painted as an older, nearly broken but much wiser man in his old age, an enormous painting housed in the Hermitage Museum in the Winter Palace of the Russian Czars at

Saint Petersburg. Henri Nouwen turned this painting and the parable on which it was based into a kind of hobby, an obsession of his really. One aspect of the story Jesus told had always puzzled him as a boy and as a young priest. That is the fact that the one son for whom the parable has come to be named demanded his part of the inheritance *before* his father's death. Wouldn't the father, the good elder brother, and for that matter, society in general have been hurt, scandalized and even outraged but such a demand? This was a question Father Nouwen posed to the many foreign missionary priests, brothers and sisters he knew, Christians who had served sometimes long ministries in societies and amid cultures not too different from rural society in the Palestine of Jesus' day. They all told

Nouwen the same thing: Not only would it be regarded as an offensive request, but, in some cases, such a son in the so-called 'simple societies' that still exist in today's world would be driven out of his tribe or clan or, in some instances, put to death. Even among us, imagine a farm family today with a child who would make such a demand. As hard as it is for our farmers to make a living feeding the world, I can imagine such a fresh mouth being offered his share of nothing and sent packing to Las Vegas or wherever his base mind might lead him. But, even so, the hurt would remain, because to make such a demand of a parent still living is to wish that parent dead.

But—and here is another strange thing about this story—the father accedes to the disrespectful

demand, gives the son what is his, measured in money, and lets him go. The result is predictable. In no time at all, he is back on the farm, this time begging, not demanding, for food and work, not for that which he never earned. And, miracle of love, the father in this story reveals himself to be the Heavenly Father of Jesus by welcoming this son back with all his heart and all he has.

The good and faithful brother is offended. Jesus' righteous hearers are offended. *We* are offended, there's no use denying it. Who wouldn't be? Do the math. In disbursing the younger son's inheritance there was less on which to run this apparently large estate, a huge farm with many dependents, a payroll that had to be met. And what does the now bankrupt younger

son's return mean? It means joy for the father, certainly on that day it meant unbelievable joy for the son who had offended his father and his family's honor. But, what would it mean for the good and faithful son, for the righteous son, for the *offended and confused* elder brother? Perhaps not very soon, but soon enough, the father would die. *Then* what?

*Then* what? The father in the parable is doing more than accepting the younger son back into his heart. He is giving that son and his life, his future, to his elder brother. If the elder brother forgives the younger, then that forgiveness is *for life*, each and every day of their life together. On each and every one of those days, the elder brother will have to love his way past the hurt, shame and offense caused

by the younger brother, and on each and every one of those days the younger brother will have to believe the elder's forgiveness and love. If that miracle happens, it will be for the sake of the one they both love, the one who loved them both and gave them life, one whom death will take away from their midst, leaving them to deal with each other face to face.

That miracle does happen in the true Church of Jesus Christ, that unity and holiness that are two of the four marks of the true Church. That miracle happens here. It is not an easy miracle to live with, but the alternative is that we become dead to one another and dead to God. Are you ready to love the one whom you not only forgive but for whom you are responsible and will be held responsible by

Almighty God? Come Holy Spirit of the Father and the Son and lead us into such forgiveness each new day! ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠ Amen.

