

## Reflections on Sunday's Readings: September 15, 2019



### Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14

1 Timothy 1: 12-17

Luke 15: 1-32

### *Jesus' "quintessential message" about God's Heart*

#### Introduction

It's always amazing when and where God's inspiration hits home. As I was listening to the first reading from Exodus being proclaimed this morning, something clicked inside of me. I had prayed with this reading also, but I had not seen how to incorporate it into my homily today.

As I heard it proclaimed, it seemed to me that all that is happening in the reading is happening **inside** of Moses. As he comes down the mountain (Mount Sinai) and sees the people's molten calf, he could just about kill them. After all God has done for them and he has done for them, they now make a golden calf to worship. I'm sure he could just about "brain them" and wipe them out. As Moses works this through with God, he faces the fact that maybe it is going to be too hard to mold this large group into God's people. Maybe it would be better to begin with his family and his clan, and he has a sense that this would be okay with God.

But Moses has grown close to the people and cares for them. He says to God that he does not want to abandon them, but he wants to continue with them. And this is the **link** to the Gospel that we just heard.

### **“Context” is important**

It is very important to be aware of the context of these three parables that Jesus offers us in the Gospel today. Tax collectors and sinners are drawing near to listen to Jesus. They feel that they might have a chance of being included because of Jesus’ words and actions, and so they come to hear him and speak with him. The Pharisees and scribes, the religious leaders of the day, begin to complain to Jesus and his disciples that he is welcoming sinners and eats with them. They question his “table fellowship” with publicly-known sinners and those who are outcast. So Jesus tells them several parables to explain his mission and how he sees God.

### **Jewish believers**

It is also important to take a moment and reflect on these Jewish believers and leaders. They believed it important to live the Torah or the “law of God” with intentionality and conviction in order to witness to God’s ways for others. To do this meant gathering with other like-minded believers to stay strong in their faith. It also meant in their minds to avoid those who seem to be watering down their faith or wandering from it like tax-collectors who collaborated with the Romans and public sinners. It seemed to these Jewish believers, and many faith-filled people through the ages, that it is better to stay among other faithful believers to stay strong in their faith and practice. There is truth to this, but it can also lead to judgement and criticism of these “others.”

### **Jesus’ path of engagement**

Jesus is taking another “tack,” or approach, in his life. He is open to those who are different, to those who are questioning their faith, or to those who are moving away from their faith. Jesus’ approach is one of “engagement” in order to possibly call them back to God and to the believing community.

His engagement with others also stretches him at times as we see in various Gospel stories, especially the story of his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman. Here, as we remember, he uses a colloquium about ‘not giving the food meant first for the children to the household pets;’ and the woman quite assertively says to him ‘but even the dogs under the table eat the scraps of the children.’ She’s saying I will take the scraps. I want my daughter to be healed, and Jesus is touched by her faith.

Jesus seems to be enacting the vision that it is worth engaging others for the sake of God’s love and to strengthen the communion among us all for the sake of God’s love.

### **“Sacramental” sign**

Another insight here is that for the Jewish community to share a meal together was of great import. It had a “sacramental” nature to it. It would be like us receiving communion together with others, and it holds this same kind of power. To share a meal with another brought you into communion with them, and this is what they are questioning about Jesus and his table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners.

In Jesus a greater freedom is at work. He shows us that we can go forth and engage others because we are grounded in God's love and that these efforts of "sharing communion and encouraging communion" en flesh the heart of God.

### **Parable of the Lost Sons**

To bring this fully home Jesus tells the final parable that we often call the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." It might be better named the "Parable of the Lost Sons" because both sons are lost. Yes, the younger son pulls away from the Father and from his family, his community, and all the values that they hold sacred. He wants to find life all on his own. It is very much like the country song "looking for love in all the wrong places."

But the older, dutiful son is also lost. For whatever reasons, he doesn't really "know" and accept his belovedness. He is living more like one enslaved who hopes to possibly gain his freedom and inheritance sometime in the future. He doesn't know and feel that he is cherished by the Father and that all that the Father has is his.

The younger son, as he plans the words he will say to his Father, is really just trying to survive. He still hasn't reached the point of true repentance, but the lavishness of his Father's love begins to open his eyes to love and to what he has really done.

And the older duty-bound son, who has no joy in his Father's presence or their common life together, also is missing the lavishness of God's love. In this very patriarchal society of Jesus' times, it is as if the Father in the story kneels before each of his sons and says "You are precious to me. Come home." This is very radical for Jesus' time. A mother would most likely say "I want my son home. I forgive you and welcome you." But this is the Father, and he too offers this unconditional love to each of his sons.

What an image for us of God's heart toward us!

What we all need, and we are all sinners ... some more than others, and some caught up in duty ... is the awareness that our Good God wants to say to each of us "All I have is yours!" Through our wanderings and through our devotion, have we "caught" this or "received" this.

### **Conclusion**

One final thought ... we come together this morning to share a meal with Jesus. Jesus is inviting us into his "table fellowship," as we are, so that we might know our preciousness to God. As we receive this gracious gift once again today, may we go out to others who are still looking for this acceptance and loving-kindness of God. In truth, we find it together.

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