

Sunday, March 31, 2019

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading Joshua 5:9-12

Responsorial: Psalm 34:2-7

2nd Reading: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Gospel: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

A Parable of a Forgiving Father and of Initial and Ongoing Conversion

This man welcomes sinners. (Luke 15:2)

Isn't it ironic that this story, which is one of the best loved in all of Scripture, has a somewhat misleading title? Rather than calling it the parable of the prodigal son, we should call it the parable of the forgiving father. This is not a story only about one son. It's a story about two sons and their father. And as a parable, this story tells us about our heavenly Father's infinite love for us.

The parable of the prodigal son has two distinct goals: it shows us that God wants everyone to know his love, and it shows us that God wants those who know his love to experience it more deeply.

In a sense, the prodigal son was "dead" because of the sins he had committed when he was away from home. But the moment he came back, it's as if he had come back to life. Jesus used this fellow to describe people who have not accepted the love that God has for them. They need to turn and come home to him. They need what we would call an "initial conversion."

These are the people God asks us to lift up in prayer in a special way—especially our loved ones who are far from the Lord. May they all experience an initial conversion!

The prodigal son's older brother, however, was already "alive." He was faithful and hardworking. But he also needed a conversion. He may have been obedient to his father, but a lot of sinful thoughts still occupied his mind. This fellow needed "ongoing conversion," a deeper turning away from his habits of resentment, anger, and self-righteousness.

Even if we believe in Jesus, pray every day, and go to Mass regularly, we still need ongoing conversion. We can be trying our best to live good lives and to care for our families. But we can fall into judgmental, self-righteous, self-centered ways of thinking. And so God asks us to keep turning to him for help and healing.

God welcomes home everyone who comes to him. No matter how big or small our sins, he is always waiting with open arms.

"Thank you, Father, for welcoming me home."

(Many thanks to ***The Word Among Us*** for allowing us to use meditations from their monthly devotional magazine. Used with permission. For more information on how to subscribe to their devotional magazine, go to www.wau.org).

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion:

1. In the first reading, we hear these words: *The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you." While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth of the month. On the day after the Passover, they ate of the produce of the land in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain. On that same day after the Passover, on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased. No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.*
 - What do you believe is the message of this passage?
 - How does it apply to way the Lord acts in your own life?
2. The responsorial psalm opens with these words: *I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth.* It continues with these words: *Let my soul glory in the LORD; the lowly will hear me and be glad. Glorify the LORD with me, let us together extol his name. I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your faces may not blush with shame. When the poor one called out, the LORD heard, and from all his distress he saved him.*
 - Even though the opening words of the psalm may seem impossible to do, why is it important for us to continually bless and praise the Lord *at all times*? How would you summarize the psalmist's reason for doing this?
 - What are some specific reasons for you to do this, as well?
 - What additional steps might you take – through your prayer and reception of the Eucharist during Lent – to deepen your relationship with the Lord and *be radiant with joy*?
3. The second reading begins with these uplifting words: *Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.* It goes on to tell us that God has *reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation* and that we are *ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us.* It ends with these powerful words: *For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.*
 - What do you think it means to be a "new creation" in Christ? How would you describe what are the "old things" that have passed away and the *new things* that have come?
 - What practical steps can you take to be an "ambassador" of reconciliation within your family or within your parish?
 - What do the ending words of the reading mean and how do they apply to you?
4. The Gospel reading opens with these words: *Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* Jesus responds by telling the familiar Gospel parable of the prodigal son.
 - What message do you think Jesus was trying to convey with this parable?
 - What are the circumstances in your life that can cause you, like the younger son, to value what God can do for you more than you value a relationship of love and intimacy with him? What causes you to come to your senses?
 - In what areas of your life do you see attitudes like the older brother (e.g., lack of gratitude, lack of compassion, unforgiveness, self-righteousness)? What steps can you take to change these attitudes?
5. The meditation is a reflection on the Gospel reading and begins with these words: "Isn't it ironic that this story, which is one of the best loved in all of Scripture, has a somewhat misleading title? Rather than calling it the parable of the prodigal son, we should call it the parable of the forgiving father. This is not a story only about one son. It's a story about two sons and their father. And as a parable, this story tells us about our heavenly Father's infinite love for us." The meditation goes on to describe the younger son's need for an "initial conversion" and the older son's need for an "ongoing conversion." It ends with these words: "Even if we believe in Jesus, pray every day, and go to Mass regularly, we still need ongoing conversion. We can be trying our best to live good lives and to care for our families. But we can fall into judgmental, self-righteous, self-centered ways of thinking. And so God asks us to keep turning to him for help and healing. God welcomes home everyone who comes to him. No matter how big or small our sins, he is always waiting with open arms."
 - Do you agree or disagree with these words from the meditation: "Rather than calling it the parable of the prodigal son, we should call it the parable of the forgiving father"? Why?
 - The meditation also tells us that we all need "initial conversion" like the prodigal son and "ongoing conversion" like the older son? What do these words mean and how do they apply to you?

Take some time now to pray and thank your heavenly Father for welcoming you home, as he did the prodigal son. Use the prayer at the end of the meditation as a starting point.

"Thank you, Father, for welcoming me home."

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]