

## **The Fourth Sunday of Lent** (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Joshua 5:9A, 10-12
<i>Response</i>	Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7
<i>Second Reading</i>	2 Corinthians 5:17-21
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I will get up and go to my Father and shall say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent, every year, is called *Laetare Sunday*. It is kind of the mid-way (midpoint) through the Season of Lent and the name *Laetare* is from the Latin “rejoice”, from the introit for today which is taken from Isaiah 66, “Rejoice Jerusalem”. There are lots of traditions associated with this particular Sunday of Lent, one of them is the wearing of rose-colored vestments. It is a halfway point between the opening of the Season of Lent on Ash Wednesday and the joy of the resurrection that we are all journeying toward throughout this season. I think in light of that, it is particularly important that we’re going to focus on a parable of Jesus about the joy that takes place in Heaven over one sinner who repents. The most famous story of repentance in the Bible is the parable of the (so-called) Prodigal Son. I say “so-called” there because that’s the most famous name for it, as we’re going to see in a second, there are different ways to refer to this parable that actually affect the way you interpret it.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the gospel reading for today for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent in Year C. This is another one of those occasions in which (in year C) the Church puts before us those passages in the Gospel of Luke that are unique to Luke’s gospel. I just want you to think about this. This is probably the most famous story that Jesus ever told. It is certainly the most famous of all of the parables (the Prodigal Son), and if we did not have the Gospel of Luke, we would not know a thing about it, it’s the only gospel that preserves this parable, this famous story of Jesus. It’s also one of the longest of the parables that Jesus ever told. For today, what I want to do is, I know you know the story, but I still want to read it through

in its entirety just so we can feel the full effect of the parable, and then we'll back up and walk through it piece-by-piece and part-by-part and try to put it in its 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish context and open up what Jesus meant when he said the parable, and also what it means for us today.

The lectionary for today actually doesn't begin with the parable itself, it actually puts the parable in its setting (in its context) from Luke's gospel. It starts with Luke 15: 1-3.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable:

And then it skips down to verse 11. It says this:

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry. "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him,

‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’<sup>1</sup>

Okay, we’ll stop there. There is so much going on in this amazing, powerful story. The first point I want to make about this parable is: What should we call it? What should the name of this parable be? Obviously, in the gospels themselves the parables don’t receive names (that’s something that comes out of the tradition). And whatever you call the parable has an effect on the way you interpret it, because it puts a certain emphasis somewhere. In this case there’s actually a number of different opinions on what the name of this parable should be. Obviously, the most famous name of the parable is “The Prodigal Son”, and that name puts the emphasis on the sin of the younger son. It actually derives this from verse 13 when it says that the younger son “squandered his property in loose living.” The Greek word behind “loose living” there can be translated as “prodigal living”. So he squanders everything that he’s doing. Most people, when they think of this parable (The Parable of the Prodigal Son), the emphasis falls on his sin and I don’t think that’s actually inconsequential, it kind of draws us into it, it catches our attention.

But that’s not the only way to name the parable, that’s not the only way to look at it. Other people, like Fr. Pablo Gadenz, who wrote a wonderful commentary on Luke that just came out last year, he refers to this as “The Parable of the Merciful Father” or “The Parable of the Compassionate Father”, and you can call the Parable that. What it does is it puts the emphasis not on the sin of the younger son, but on the compassion and mercy of the father. Still, other people have said that this parable should be called “The Parable of the Two Sons.” For example, Pope Bene-

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

dict XVI, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, refers to this as “The Parable of the Two Sons”. This name puts the emphasis on the contrast between the humility of the younger son and his repentance, and the pride and the anger of the older son who is resentful because of the mercy that the father has shown to the younger son. And then finally, my favorite name for the parable, I think the best name for the parable, is actually “The Parable of the Lost Son”. The reason I think that is the one that most captures the essence of the parable is because if you look at it in the context of Luke 15, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the third in a series of three parables that all have the same theme: Lost and Found. Although the lectionary omits it, before this there was a parable of tThe Lost Sheep (that was found), of the Lost Coin (that was found), and then of the Lost Son (who was found), and this one actually uses the language of the father himself. How does he describe his son? He doesn’t describe him as a prodigal son, he says, “This, my son was lost, and now has been found”, and it says that twice. Anyway, that’s just to give you a little bit of insight into just the way these parables, the names affect how we read them. In any case, every one of those names has an element of truth to it, because it is a complex story with a number of different meanings and a number of different points all going on at the same time.

With that in mind, for our purposes here, I just want to put the emphasis on the fact that, in context, Jesus is telling this parable as a response to the Pharisees and the Scribes who are offended by the fact that Jesus is receiving sinners and eating with them. So the context of the parable is his response to their lack of comfort with the fact that he’s receiving people who are sinners — by the way, which means, people who are known publicly for breaking the Law of Moses, or breaking the Ten Commandments, like an adulteress, like Herodias, or an adulterer like Herod; they would be a sinner. A tax collector would be considered a sinner, because he would be publicly colluding with the Romans against the Israelite people and being known as a thief and an extortionist; so any one of those categories of people are sinners. And so Jesus is eating with them, the Pharisees and Scribes who see themselves as righteous are offended by that, and Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son in response.

Alright, so now that we got that out of the way, let’s just walk through the parable itself and see if we can draw out some of the deeper meaning of it, by focusing on each of the major episodes. So the first episode in the parable has to do with the departure of the younger son. Now, over the years I’ve heard a lot of homilists who’ve preached on this. It’s very popular to say that when the younger son asked

the father for his inheritance, he's basically saying to the father, "I wish you were dead." That's become a kind of common point of homiletics. It's not entirely untrue in the sense that ordinarily, a father's inheritance would be given to his children on the point of his death. It was ordinary to wait until the end of one's life to separate out the inheritance amongst one's children. However, I don't know of any ancient Jewish text that says if a child asks for the inheritance early it means "I wish you were dead." I actually think the axe in here, the offense here, really falls, not so much on the fact that the son asks for the property in advance, but for the fact that once he takes his inheritance, what does he do? He leaves. He goes to a far country. Because see, in an agricultural Jewish society, when a son would come into his father's inheritance, what he would do is he would become the heir to the land that belonged to his father and the land and the property that were part of his family inheritance. These were people who lived on particular plots of land. Whenever God brings the tribes of Israel into the Promised Land, they each get a portion of land that is then kept within that family. That's part of what the inheritance is: the land, not just the money, but the land. And so in this case, what the son does is, he takes his inheritance, and instead of setting up his own household and his own farm on his father's estate and on the family land, he goes away. He goes to a far country, which says "I don't want to be in a relationship with you anymore. I don't want to be part of the family." Does that make sense? You see? (I'm asking a camera but a camera can't answer me.) I hope that makes sense, that he departs, and that actually is even more offensive than asking for the inheritance in advance, because to be "in the land" is to be in the realm of where God has promised his people to live, it's a rejection of God's promise of giving the land to his descendants. So instead of staying in his father's country, he goes to a far country and there he squanders his inheritance on loose living, on sin.

Now if you're a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jew and you're hearing this parable and you think about the notion of leaving the family land and going off into a far country, that would immediately make you think of the theme of exile. This happens to Israel over and over again, whether it's when they are in exile in Egypt at the time of the Exodus of Moses, or whether they're in Babylon, or in Assyria. Whenever Israel goes off into a far country, it's invariably tied to their sin. So it's a kind of geographical symbol of them being in a broken relationship with God. It's the theme of exile. So exile and sin go together over and over again in the Bible. And in this case they go together too. When the son goes into a far country, while he's there, a great famine arises and he begins to be in want. And so he goes and joins himself to one of the citizens of that country and he goes out into the fields to feed the pigs,

to feed the swine. Now again, if you're a 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish person and you're hearing Jesus tell this parable for the first time, you would know immediately that that far country is not Israelite territory, because it is a territory where people are farming pigs, which were forbidden (by the Mosaic Law) to be eaten by the Jewish people. That's one of the Laws of Kashrut, of clean and unclean animals. As I tell my students, "There are no Jewish pig farmers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century A.D."

So, the fact that this, the younger son, is in a country where there are swine herds, tells you that he's in Gentile territory. He's outside the Promised Land. So again, it's the theme of sin and exile. And in this case, he's suffering and he's in a state of uncleanness as well. He's living amongst the pigs, so he's in a state of perpetual uncleanness and he's starving and he's suffering. Now I want to press pause here for just a second, because when we think of sin, the metaphor I think many people today think of is that of a rule being broken. If we commit a sin, what we've done is we've broken a rule, and therefore we deserve to be punished (for example). And that's one way to look at sin, as rules and commandments. But there are other metaphors for sin. And in this case, there are three images that are tied to sin in this parable that are really important to highlight. Sin as exile, as being separated from people, separated from God (in particular), separated from the land. Second, sin as suffering; so what happens to the man when he goes into the sinful state? He's not happy. He's in despair, he's suffering. And then third, sin as uncleanness. He's amongst the pigs, he's amongst the swine. He's been brought low, he's living like he's one of the beasts. And that's also something sin does. It separates us from others, it brings suffering into our lives, and it also gives us a sense that we're unclean, that we're not worthy.

And so what happens is, the son, when he hits proverbial "rock bottom" here, in verse 17 it says something very important: "When he came to himself." He has an epiphany, he has an awakening about who he is and what his life is intended for. So it says "when he came to himself", he said, "How many of my father's servants have enough food to eat, but I'm here dying with hunger? I will arise, I'm going to go to my father and I will say, 'Father I've sinned against heaven and before you'" (which by the way means, "I've sinned against God and I've sinned against you."). In ancient Judaism, "Heaven" was a euphemism or a circumlocution (that's a big word) for saying, "a way of speaking around the name of God". Instead of pronouncing God's name what you would just say is "Heaven". So, here, what does the son recognize? "I've sinned against God, and I've sinned against you. I'm not worthy to be called 'your son', just treat me like one of your slaves." So this is

the key moment for the younger son. This is the moment of repentance, where he's turning away from his sin, turning away from his uncleanness, coming to a realization about who he actually is, and (in that state of repentance) resolving (making a resolution) to return to the land, return to his father, and confess what he's done. Not only against his dad, but against God the Father in heaven, and to ask to be taken back into the household, not as a son, because he doesn't feel worthy to be his son, but at least as a slave, at least as a servant. He's kind of drawing this contrast between slavery and sonship. Keep that in mind. It's going to be important. It's going to come up again when we look at the elder son.

So the son resolves to go back, and as he's going back we have this beautiful image of he arises, and he goes back to his father. And while he was still at a distance, Jesus says, the father saw him. And again, many homilists have pointed this out and I think that this is a legitimate insight, it's really powerful: that, the fact that the father saw him coming reveals to us that the father is waiting for him to return. He's anticipating for him to return. He's looking out for him. Long before the son decided to return to the father, the father was waiting for him to come back. But in this case he doesn't wait for the son to give his little speech or anything, it says that the father had compassion, and the Greek word here is *esplangnisthē*, it means he "felt it in his bowels", in his gut. It's a very powerful kind of concrete way to describe this feeling of compassion that is deep within, not just his heart, but even within his gut. He had compassion and he ran and embraced the son and kissed him.

Now, I hate to keep harping on this stuff but I think it's helpful, so again, I've heard people preach that it was shameful for a man to run in public. So the father has this (kind of like) sense of abandonment, and he doesn't care what anyone thinks of him. That's possible, but I know of no 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Jewish sources, no biblical or Jewish sources that say anything about it being shameful for a father to run in public or anything like that. So I don't know that that's actually true. What is clear, however, is that when it says he embraced him, there is a real power being described here. Literally in the Greek it says, "he threw himself on his neck". So it isn't that he just hugged him. In the Greek, he "cast himself on the neck of his son". Now if you want to know what that Greek word means, you don't have to learn Greek. All you have to do is go on the Internet and watch videos of military families being reunited, like in the airport or something like that, after a spouse comes home from war. They entertain the possibility that they may not have ever seen one another again and then they are able to be reunited for the first time. They don't just hug each other, they don't just kiss one another, they throw themselves

on one another in an embrace. That is what the father feels, that's what he's doing when the younger son comes home. He throws himself on his neck and he kisses him with the joy that his son has returned. And we see here that the son gives his speech, his confession, you know, "Father I have sinned", he says his act of contrition so-to-speak, but what's fascinating is the father doesn't respond to that. He doesn't do what you might think natural. Put yourself in the father's place. If your son had taken all your money (his inheritance), gone off and squandered it, lived among the gentiles, rejected you, rejected the homeland, rejected your family property, and now he's come back, what you might be inclined to say? I can imagine a situation where the father would say, "See? I told you so." Where you might want to rebuke the son and say, "I guess you learned your lesson" or any number of responses that might seem justified given the gravity of what the younger son has done, given the gravity of his sin. But the father doesn't do any of those things. He doesn't even respond to the son's confession of repentance. He simply turns to the servants and says "Get the best robe, put it on him. Put a ring on his hand, shoes on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let us eat and rejoice." So what is the response of the father? Mercy toward his penitent son, joy that the son has come out of exile and has returned home, and also favor toward the son. He wants to give him the best robe. He wants to shower him with gifts. If you're a Jew, again, can you think of a son who got the best robe? Well, you would think of Joseph in the Old Testament, and the coat of many colors that was given to him by Jacob, the father of Israel. He's almost depicting the son as the favored son and it seems like a disproportionate response to what the son has done and the fact that he has come home.

So why is the father so joyful? What images does he use to describe what has just happened? Well in this case, two are crucial: the image of death and resurrection, and the image of exile and return. Listen to the father's words again: "For this my son was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found." Now, those two images of death and being lost are powerful metaphors for the reality of what sin does to us. To be immersed in sin is to be lost. It is to be in exile, not just from God, but from others, because what sin does is it separates us from God and it separates us from others. It destroys our relationships with God and our relationship with our neighbor. So when sin is repented of, and a conversion takes place, what happens is the exile that sin invariably does to us is undone and we are able to return. The other image is of death and life. If you re-read the parable carefully you can actually hear this. What does the son keep saying? "I will arise. I will arise. I will arise and go to my father." So it's a story of a death and a resurrection. Not a physical death,



and physical resurrection, but spiritual death and spiritual resurrection. That's how God sees repentance. In an earlier video I mentioned how repentance is like a bad word in our day and time. Nothing could be further from the truth when we look at sin and repentance from God's perspective. From God's perspective, the act of repentance, of true repentance, is nothing less than a resurrection from the dead and a return from exile. That is a reason to rejoice. That's why I think you can call this (the best name is) "The Parable of the Lost Son", or in this case, "The Parable of the Son who has been found" may be better because that's where the point is.

Now, many of us I think, for me, in our imagination, stop the parable there. Like, "Yay! The son's back, the father's forgiven him, all is well." But Jesus doesn't stop the parable there. He moves on to give a kind of epilogue so-to-speak, with the reaction of the elder son. So let's see what the response of the elder son is here. In this case, what happens is, while all this is going on, the elder son comes in from the field. So what's he doing out in the field? Well, he's working, because he works for his father on the family land. What is his response to the repentance of the younger son? It's not mercy, it's not compassion, and it's certainly not joy. It is anger. He is angry, and he's so angry at what has happened that he refuses to go into his father's house. Now notice, notice the parallel between this and the younger son. Earlier, when the younger son asks for his inheritance, he leaves the father's house and goes to another land. It kind of symbolizes his exile from his father, his breaking of that relationship. Now, the elder son refuses to go into his father's house. So what does that signify? Again, a kind of brokenness in the relationship; he won't go into his father's house, and the father has to come out to him and say what is happening. He explains how the brother's come home and they're rejoicing because he's safe and sound.

Now, in this case, notice what happens here. When the older brother begins to speak to his father, and the father is entreating him, begging him, "Come in, rejoice with us", what does the older son say? "Lo, these many years I have served you and I've never disobeyed your command." Pause there. How does the older son see his relationship with the father? Even though he's a son, he sees himself as a slave. He sees himself as a servant. "I've worked for you, I've served you all these years, and I never broke any rules." Now, I want to stress here, being a slave or a servant of God is not a bad thing. In fact, it's required. We are required to obey the commands. Paul (the apostle Paul) calls himself a "servant of the Lord" or a "slave of Christ" over and over again in the New Testament. So service to God and obedience to God isn't a bad thing. But if all you see yourself is as a slave, what you're

saying is, “I’m not a son.” There’s an antithesis here that the elder son is revealing that he only sees his relationship with his father in terms of his work and his obedience. But you can serve someone and obey them and not love them. That’s very easy to do. It’s kind of like a window into the son’s heart. “I’ve done all this, I never broke any rules, I’ve served you all this time, and you’ve not even ever given me a kid,” (which doesn’t mean a “kid”, it means a goat), “to sacrifice and make merry with my friends.” Notice, the elder son wants to celebrate with his friends, not with his father. Notice, the next line, and then he says “When this son of yours comes, you kill the fatted calf.” Notice he does not say, “When my brother comes.” Not only does his refusal to go into the house symbolize that he’s cut himself off from the family, but when he speaks to his father, he says “this son of yours”. So he cuts himself off from his brother as well.

This reminds me of something that has happened in my own household. Sometimes when (and I’m sure parents can identify with this), say one of the kids is bad, or they’ve been bad that day, me and my wife might say, “You want to know what your son did today?” or “Do you know what your daughter did today?” It’s a kind of way of like distancing yourself from the kids because they’re bad. I’m like, “Hold on a second, I think the child belongs to both of us.” But that’s the way we use language. Now obviously that’s in jest, it’s in joking, but the son here is in earnest. “This son of yours”, he has cut himself off from his brother and, in a sense, cut himself off from his father in saying that this way. How does the father respond to the elder son? Notice, he refuses to accept the image that the son’s painting of himself as just a servant. He says, “Son, you are always with me. All that is mine is yours, but it was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this, your bother (See? Your brother) was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.” So there we have it again, he’s calling the elder son into joy over the repentance of the younger one.

Why does the parable end this way? I think it takes us all the way back around to the very first verses. What was the setting of the parable in which Jesus delivered it? It was in the context of the Pharisees and the Scribes, who saw themselves as keeping the commandments and as serving God, being angry that Jesus was offering mercy and compassion and salvation and the opportunity for repentance to sinners. They are, in this sense, the Pharisees and the Scribes who feel that way about Jesus eating with sinners are like the elder son, who instead of feeling joy at the repentance of a sinner actually feels anger. They’re repelled by the compassion and the mercy of God. And that’s a real easy thing, to just ascribe to the Scribes and Pharisees of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, like “Oh they were self-righteous and that kind of

thing.” But, if you search your own heart, you’ll see, that that’s a very easy temptation to fall prey to. Like Jesus says elsewhere in the gospel, “Are you angry because I am generous?” (in The Parable of the Talents), Why does God let some people in at the ninth hour to the kingdom and they receive everything that the people who’ve been working all day do? That doesn’t seem fair It’s easy to feel a kind of spiritual envy toward that (or spiritual anger) about the kind of seemingly irrational and unjust mercy and compassion that God will show on a sinner who repents, even after the worst sins. And so, Jesus is using this parable here to teach the Scribes and Pharisees about the kind of God the father really is, and about the mercy and compassion of God that we ourselves are to emulate in loving God and loving our neighbor.

Okay, that was a long one, but there’s a lot there. There is so much more I could say. Let me just wrap up by making a few quick points. With regard to the first reading for today, as I mentioned before, it isn’t chosen to parallel the Prodigal Son parable, so if you’re preaching on this and you’re doing backflips trying to make the Old Testament correlate to the New Testament, relax, there’s no real need to. In this case, what it’s simply doing is continuing the journey through Old Testament salvation history. So last week we were looking at the account of the exodus and the appearance to Moses on Mt. Sinai, now we’re looking at the end of the Exodus in Joshua 5, as the Israelites crossed through the Red Sea and enter into the Promised Land at the time of Passover. And so in Joshua 5:9, it says this:

And the LORD said to Joshua, "This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you." And so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day.

Gilgal means “to roll”, it’s from the Hebrew *Galal*. Now if you skip down to verse 10, it says:

While the people of Israel were encamped in Gilgal they kept the passover on the fourteenth day of the month at evening in the plains of Jericho. And on the morrow after the passover, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. And the manna ceased on the morrow, when they ate of the produce of the land; and the people of Israel had manna no more, but ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year.

So, in a nutshell, what this passage shows us is that just as the first exodus began with Passover (they were set free through the Passover), so the exodus from Egypt ends (so-to-speak) with a Passover, as the Israelites crossed through the Red Sea

and then celebrate the Passover. In the spring of the year (Passover time) is when they eat the fruit of the Promised Land. So as we're heading toward Easter, remember, the Greek word for Easter (or the Latin word actually too) is *Pascha*. It means "passover". So we are journeying toward the true Passover, the ultimate Passover of Jesus Christ, which he will accomplish in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover, when he inaugurates the new exodus that's going to begin in Jerusalem and end not in the earthly Promised Land of Canaan, but in the heavenly Promised Land of the New Jerusalem.

In closing, I would just end with a reflection from Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis about the Prodigal Son, especially for how it fits into this Lenten season. First, John Paul II wrote,

Although the word "mercy" does not appear [in the Prodigal Son], it nevertheless expresses the essence of the divine mercy in a particularly clear way.<sup>2</sup>

So this parable is kind of the quintessential expression of God's mercy towards penitent sinners, towards sinners who repent. And in that line, Pope Francis, in his beautiful document, *The Face of Mercy*, had this to say about the sacrament of confession. I bring this up because during the Lenten season is a traditional time for Catholics around the world to receive the sacrament of reconciliation in preparation for the feast of Easter. One of the precepts of the Church is that every Catholic should confess their sins at least (at least) once a year, and traditionally that has been tied to the season of Lent (which is a season of penance) – receiving the sacrament of penance. And in this case Pope Francis beautifully parallels the role of the priest in the sacrament of penance with the merciful father in The Parable of the Lost Son. So, I'll end with this. Pope Francis said:

Let us never forget that to be confessors means to participate in the very mission of Jesus to be a concrete sign of the constancy of divine love that pardons and saves... *Every confessor must accept the faithful as the father in the parable of the prodigal son: a father who runs out to meet his son despite the fact that he has squandered away his inheritance*. Confessors are called to embrace the repentant son who comes back home and to express the joy of having him back again.... *May confessors not ask useless*

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *The Mercy of God*, no. 5

*questions, but like the father in the parable, interrupt the speech prepared ahead of time by the prodigal son, so that confessors will learn to accept the plea for help and mercy pouring from the heart of every penitent. In short, confessors are called to be a sign of the primacy of mercy always, everywhere, and in every situation, no matter what.*

So for those of you who are priests, thank you for being that sign of mercy, and for those of you lay faithful out there, let Lent be an opportunity to taste the mercy of God, of the loving father, the compassionate father, in the sacrament of reconciliation.