

4th Sunday of Lent, Cycle C  
Joshua 5:9A, 10-12  
Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7  
2 Corinthians 5:17-21  
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32  
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Today our Gospel gives us the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The title that has traditionally been given to the story is misleading. True, the son squanders his inheritance, but the real prodigal, the real spendthrift of the tale, is the father. The old man spills out his love like water, without counting the cost. And the cost is very high.

From what we know of the father, we can be sure that he provided a loving home for his boys. Nothing is said about a wife, so doubtless he did his best to be both mother and father to them. He must have expected them to be his comfort and company in old age. So imagine his heartache when this young ingrate summons up the courage to confront him, and blurts out, "I want what's coming to me, and I want out of here."

Now the father didn't have to give the kid a penny. In those days a patriarch had absolute authority over his family. When he said 'jump,' they said 'how high.' But *this* father didn't want his children to be slaves or puppets. He wanted his sons' love, but only if it was given freely. He gave them freedom so they could *choose* to love him. So, with astonishing generosity, he gave his boy a generous slice of his worldly goods, and cut him loose. The father is prodigal -- with his property -- but especially with his love. He gives someone precious to him, the freedom to walk away.

Inevitably, the son blows his inheritance on bad wine and worse

company. *Now* maybe you'd think he'd have sense enough to go home and mend fences. No way. He's full of twisted pride, and would rather slop pigs for a slave-driver than face his father. He'd rather starve ...almost.

When the reality of the situation sinks in, when the boy finally realizes that 'I'd rather starve' is more than a figure of speech, he decides to return. While he still has strength enough to walk, he tucks his tail between his legs, and strikes out for home.

But consider *how* he goes home. To me, this is where the young man adds insult to injury. Now the gracious thing to do would be simply to throw himself on the mercy of his father -- to return unconditionally. But he can't do that. He still has something stuck in his craw. Maybe it's pride. Maybe it's fear of rejection. Or it could be some perverse form of sibling rivalry. Apparently the old refrain, 'Father always loved you best,' was not unknown in his family. Anyway, he doesn't simply return and beg forgiveness.

Instead, all the way home, to the accompaniment of his rumbling stomach, he practices a stilted little speech: "Father I have sinned against God and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired hands."

You know, for all that's happened to this kid, I don't think he's changed one whit. All his problems *began* when he started demanding what he thought he 'deserved' -- a slice of the family pie. Now, after all he's been through, he's *still* talking about what he does and does not *deserve*. (So much for the idea that travel is broadening.) He doesn't *deserve* to be treated as a son any longer, but he somehow figures he still rates being a farmhand.

You can just see him on the long trek home, resolving to give his father an honest day's labor for a fair wage. 'I'll work harder than all the rest of those louts on the farm. The old codger will have no excuse to complain about *me*.

The bottom line is he doesn't want to be indebted to his father. He doesn't want to give him the satisfaction. He's still appealing to what he thinks is justice, instead of opening himself to his father's love. Now if he got what he *really* deserved...he wouldn't be able to sit down for a week. But, of course, that doesn't occur to him.

Finally, he draws near home. While he's still a long way off his father sees him, drops what he's doing and runs out to meet him. The old man is overcome with joy. He throws his arms around the boy and shouts and weeps and generally makes a fool of himself in front of the kid. The whole household is in an uproar, with servants running every which way for robes and rings and books of recipes for fatted calf. And through it all . . .his son is stiff. He's still standing on his dignity. Even after this outrageous demonstration of affection, he still insists on giving his little speech: "I am not worthy to be your son" -- the whole well-practiced spiel.

At this point you'd think the father would draw back. You'd expect him to be insulted. That would be the human reaction. You'd expect him to say something like, 'You little schlemiel, after all these years don't you know me better than that? Can't you give me a *little* credit? I'm not going to make you a farmhand. You're my son!

But not a word of it. Instead, he announces: "Let's celebrate. This son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and is found." Then the party begins.

The father in the story is God -- the same God who in our first reading is raining bread from heaven all over the chosen people. And if that weren't enough, whole flocks of quail keep dropping right in their cooking pots. The birds do everything but pluck their own feathers. And all the while the people are moaning and complaining about how they deserve better.

Then one day the bread from heaven stops falling. Is it because God is sick and tired of the people's carping ingratitude? No. It's because God has something even better for them -- a promised land overflowing with milk and honey.

The point is, God doesn't *want* to give us what we deserve. (Thank heaven for that!) Instead, God wants to shower us with every good gift we can imagine -- and some that we can't. God wants to be mother and father to us. Actually, a parent's love is only a shadow of what God feels for us. It's just the best human analogy we have. "Though a mother forsake her child God will not abandon you."

God will not abandon us, but God wants us to *choose* to give our love in return. We are free to walk away. But whenever we turn around, there God will be, ready to sweep us up in a loving embrace. God isn't afraid to look foolish in front of us.

We are free to walk away. Does that mean God isn't hurt by our treachery -- doesn't feel pain at our ingratitude? The crucifixion ought to lay that idea to rest. God is willing to take us back on our own terms. That's fortunate, because even when we do respond to divine love, we are stiff and reserved about it, like a twelve-year-old boy embarrassed by his mother's hug. But God doesn't demand graciousness from us, or perfect contrition. God just wants us to come *home* . . . then the party

can begin.