

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Catholic Men's Fellowship Conference

Saturday, 2nd Week of Lent

Catholic Men's Fellowship Conference

St. Joseph, Fullerton

Mar. 23, 2019

Introduction

We just heard one of the most famous passages in all the Bible, namely, Jesus' unforgettable parable of the Prodigal Son. Reflecting on this parable, I realized I would be speaking to a gathering of fathers and sons and that the parable is itself a story about a father and his sons. This tale of how the two sons received their father's love is meant to tell us something about our relationship with God. How we respond to his divine love defines our greatness our lack thereof.

The Father

For a moment, let's give some thought to the father in the parable. Reading between the lines, it seems he was successful. An American imagination would place his estate out west somewhere, a spread that was something like the Ponderosa (the ranch, not the steakhouse). To succeed as a rancher the father had to be tough and hardworking and he wanted his sons to be involved in the enterprise he worked so hard to build up. In fact, his eldest son managed day to day operations including a workforce that was expected to tend the herds. For his part, the father, though successful had plenty to worry about - worries that probably eluded his younger son. He had to worry about thieves and marauders, disease among his livestock, meeting the payroll, the price which he'd get for his livestock, and so forth. Then, as now, it was not an easy business.

In spite of being a toughened rancher and businessman, it seems evident that the father also had a tender heart, even an indulgent heart. After all, he gave roughly a third of his inheritance to his youngest son who promptly went off and squandered

it. The parable gives us a pretty clear picture of the younger son's sinful way of life but it only implies how much the father suffered in his son's absence. The old man missed his youngest son and suspected the worst was happening to him. In those days there was no way to call him or to skype his son. So the father quietly grieved for his son, wondering if he would ever see him alive again.

And like every good and loving parent, he didn't give up. How many times a day did he stand at the roadside, looking both ways, hoping to catch a glimpse of his young son. Every good parent can identify with the strong and tender heart of this father. Every good parent can identify with the high cost - emotional and spiritual - that the son's dissolute behavior exacted from that father's heart. Do we not also see in this father an image of God the Father who grieves when we turn away from him, yet never gives up on us? Do we not see in this father's grief the suffering of God the Father who gave us his only Son, crucified for our sins? As we mature spiritually, we must grow in appreciation of the high price that our sins exacted from our loving God!

The Younger Son

What about the younger son? By the time he came along, his father and mother were a bit older and a lot more prosperous. He probably had advantages that his older brother did not have - a better education, a more comfortable lifestyle, and so forth. By then his father's ranch was fully staffed with ranch hands and servants so that the young son didn't have to learn how to be a rancher from the ground up nor did he have to look after his own needs. It didn't take long before he took his father's prosperity, largess, and love for granted. Actually, he had no idea how much hard work and sweat equity it took to make the ranch a going concern and to keep it that way.

So coming of age, his head turned by wine, women, and song, the younger son demanded of his father his share of the inheritance - as noted above fully a third of his father's net worth. The father could not have harbored many illusions about what the younger son would do with his hard-earned money but like many parents he granted his son, now grown, his freedom. The younger son misused his freedom by sinning and his sins brought him to an abject and utter miserable state, so much so,

that he decided to return to his father.

The young man's repentance was sincere but as yet incomplete. He recognized that he would be better off as a hired hand on his dad's ranch than as a starving swineherd in a foreign country. As yet he wasn't sorry for causing his father grief or for wasting his money but when he caught sight of his merciful and loving father on the road, his imperfect contrition turned into genuine contrition. The sight of his anxious father made him realize that his sins were an offense against his father's love, and even though he couldn't get his confession out, he knew his father understood and accepted it. Perhaps he now knew how costly the father's forgiveness truly was. Perhaps he appreciated his father's sleepless nights and anguish. But did he resolve never again to return to a dissolute way of living? Did he make what we would call a firm purpose of amendment?

In that son, let us see ourselves who in baptism were granted the inheritance of the father's love and who have squandered it. Perhaps this afternoon or this morning we returned to God the father in the Sacrament of Reconciliation by an unburdening confession of our sins. Do we appreciate the high cost of our redemption – namely, that it was purchased by the blood of Christ? Will we return to a prodigal way of life when the opportunity presents itself as surely it will, sooner or later, in our complicated lives?

The Older Son

This leaves the older son who came in from the fields only to find that his irresponsible kid brother had returned home after wasting the assets of his father and the ranch. To make matters worse, instead of chastising him severely for being such a ne'er-do-well, the father throws a party for his errant son, and the hardworking older son is the last to know about it. The older son felt as though his father took him for granted.

Perhaps we feel a little sympathy for the older son but let's not overlook what the Lord is trying to teach us by this son's negative reaction to his young brother's return. If we were to imagine the Church as the father's ranch, we might think of the older son as those who worked in the Church for years. They are the picture of fidelity; they are devoted and hardworking. They deserve great respect for what they

have done and are doing. Yet, as they labor in their parishes and other ministries year over year, they may also become set in their ways, unopen to newcomers, all the while feeling as though they are taken for granted. This is especially the case when the latecomers arrive, younger parishioners, perhaps those who have been away from the Church for a period of years. They are greeted with a lot of fanfare and suddenly their opinions hold sway and suddenly their way of doing things gains a lot of attention. It's a recipe for resentment and for walking away.

What we would like to have seen in the parable is for the older brother to greet his younger brother, to welcome him home, to join the celebration – and then to befriend him, listen to him, and help him to be the son his father deserves. Instead, the older son is petulant and wants to walk away and would have done so but for the father's pleading. Yet, if God the Father has made room for us in his heart due to his great mercy, so too we need to make room for one another in our hearts, actively seeking out young men, fathers of young families, those who are seeking for something more, those who want to live their faith – but that also means welcoming their ideas and their ways of doing things. For those of us who, like myself, have been around for a while, that's not easy.

Conclusion

This afternoon let us thank the Father of mercies for the forgiveness he lavishes upon us and let us ask him also that we may be forgiving and eager to welcome that who want to join us and those who would come after us. The name for this is: evangelization!

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!