

Today's gospel is likely one of the more recognized and easily described, especially by those who aren't proficient at quoting verse and chapter, stories in the Bible. It provides us with one of the clearest and meaningful examples of forgiveness around. And considering it is a parable, it's probably one of the most beloved ones given its ease of description and meaning. It is, isn't it?

And that brings me to my next question. Which character in the parable to you most relate to? Think about it for a moment. Do you identify with the prodigal whose self-imposed exile from family, home, and faith leads him to unfathomable depths? Or is it the father who amazingly let's the sins of the son roll off his back like water on a duck, rejoicing extravagantly that he has returned? Or are you the older brother who sits there gobsmacked at the rank injustice of the scene unfurling right before him? I'm resisting the urge to ask for a show of hands, but may ask you after the service so be prepared...

We should probably start with a bit of background on today's lesson. The parable of the Prodigal Son is the third in a series of parables dealing with things that are lost. If you look in your bulletin you will see there are a couple verses missing in the reading. If you replace verses four through 10

you will find the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin respectively. Maybe the good people who put together the revised common lectionary were trying to save some time but I think they do a disservice leaving these shorter parables out. Why? The purpose of them being there is to allow Jesus to build momentum, affording the prodigal son parable the weighty coup de grace driving the serious point home! What is that serious point? Well, to put it plainly, we are more valuable than sheep and coins. (Amen.) But there's more!

The parable of the prodigal son seems one tailor made for the season of Lent. The very ebb and flow of story comprise the movement of this season of reflection, repentance, and renewal. We start with our regular lives, filled with busyness and distraction, falling short at near every turn letting ourselves, our families, and our Father down with each misstep. And then Ash Wednesday. Like the prodigal we come to the sobering realization that we are lost. We are dust. And most importantly, we need to return to home, to God. There in the filth of the pigpen, recognizing that even our father's servants are doing better than lounging and sharing a trough with the swine, we decide to turn. To turn and return home. We beat ourselves up and work out what we are going to say, practice our tone and facial expression, really hoping to drive home how bad we feel. At the

end of a long journey, seemingly endless in light of our darkness, we are nearing home. And then we stop.

Off in the distance we see someone. Are they, wait, running toward us? We panic because it just dawns on us that we don't have that extra quarter mile to run through our speech one last time. And the figure draws nearer we realize it is our father. He is definitely running. This isn't a slow motion romance film montage that is unfolding before you, this is live action, linebacker about to take out the receiver. You are tackled and covered not with punches and slaps, but tears and kisses. We can't get a word in edgewise. And maybe, no definitely, that is the point.

You find the lost sheep, you rejoice. You find the lost coin, you rejoice. You find your lost son, you rejoice. Short of Jesus offering himself in love on a cross there is rarely a clearer image of God's love for us to ponder. For all the time we may spend identifying with the son who runs off and finds himself lost, or even the older son who protests that love could be offered in the face of great offense, we should spend the majority of the rest of our time in this season of Lent pondering what it means that God's love for us is so deep and unquestionable that it becomes scandalous and defies reason.

If you need an image to get you through Easter let it be this one.

Focus solely on the face of the Father. The father who for all intents and purposes was told to drop dead so his son could receive his inheritance. The father who watched, in love, his son leave the comfort of home, of family, to make what you had to know was a huge mistake. The Father who every day looked down the road praying for that familiar silhouette to appear on the horizon. That is the father who forgives and wants nothing more than to be reconciled with his children. All of them. Focus on the face of the Father who through tears and that strange half sob, half laughs, says, "welcome home." Focus on the Father that in spite of all that was lost, can now only rejoice.

We have a yearly season of reflection and repentance only because we have in God the one who loves and forgives graciously, even scandalously (ask the older brother in the parable.) We have a father who will forgive even more than the seventy times seven His Son, our Lord, recommends. And the good news? Whether we are worthy or not doesn't matter. Whether we have earned it or not isn't the point. The point is, the Good News is, our Father is waiting for us to crest the hill, waiting to cover us in tears, hugs, and kisses and rejoicing from the very depth of the Universe, cry out, "Welcome Home." May we all find ourselves in the loving

embrace of the one who lovingly and undeservingly waits. Throw your speeches aside, just come home.