

## Fourth Sunday of Lent

Year C

Jos 5:9a, 10-12  
Ps 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7  
II Cor 5:17-21  
Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

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Jesus often challenged his hearers to look at the accepted norms of his day and ask what they meant, rather than just to follow them for the sake of tradition. Our gospel story today begins with the so-called “respectable” people of his time, the Pharisees, criticizing Jesus for associating with tax collectors and sinners. So Jesus uses the story of the prodigal son to make a point.

We’re all familiar with this story. We know that Jesus was talking about sinners, especially the younger son who squandered his inheritance. And we know that Jesus was trying to help us understand that no matter what we do, God will always love us and forgive us, as the loving father in this story.

But I’d like you to consider something further. Just as Jesus tried to encourage people to look at things from a new angle, or with a new attitude, so I’d like to offer a possibility for your reflection. And this has to do with the older brother.

In Hebrew tradition the oldest son was the one to inherit the family business and fortune. Remember the commotion caused when Jacob stole his older brother Esau’s inheritance, and how sacred that was, so much so that Isaac could not rescind it even though it was given mistakenly to the younger son. So I’d like you to consider that the older brother in this tale was the privileged son, the one who was going to inherit the father’s estate. The younger son would be given something, but he would have to take it and go off to make his own fortune in life. The younger son was guilty of immaturity and perhaps a little self-pity. But he was not a malicious person, nor was it his fault that he was the second born and would not inherit his father’s estate.

The older son, then, had no more claim to this inheritance than the accident of being the firstborn. Although he is described as being hard-working and industrious, it was really self-serving. He was investing in his own future. So we could say that the older son displayed an attitude of entitlement and expected that he should be treated better simply because of the privilege of being the firstborn.

The older brother should have acted with more compassion towards his brother who made a mistake. He also had the wherewithal to be magnanimous, since he would inherit everything. But he was not. He was judgmental, self-righteous and self-centered. From this perspective, I think that the older son was much more at fault than the younger. He was just as much of a sinner and therefore also in need of forgiveness.

I ask you to consider this story in light of the privilege of being U.S. citizens in the context of a world in which the vast majority of people are not blessed with the resources and standard of living as we are. We are very generous people with our charity, it is true. And I applaud the generosity of U.S. Catholics to organizations such as the Missions, Catholic Charities, Catholic Relief Services and the like. You probably have donated much food and clothing over the years,

as well as financial donations. But we can afford to be generous, right? Like the firstborn son, we have received the inheritance, the bulk of the estate. Being people of privilege, however, we sometimes develop an attitude of entitlement. I hear this in statements that people make about immigrants, referring to people as if they had no right to look for a better life, to find a job that will provide a home and health care and education for their families. Are we in the U.S. the only people who are worthy of the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Because someone has the misfortune of being born elsewhere, in places where the standard of living is so low that children starve, or die from treatable diseases, can we honestly say that they have no right to come into our country and seek a better life? It's that attitude which was the downfall of the older son in this parable. And just as Jesus was trying to get the Pharisees to understand that tax collectors and sinners are just as worthy of God's love and forgiveness, so he is showing us that all people on the face of the earth are worthy of God's love. We are all God's children, and all deserve to have what they need in order to live and to be free and happy – not only the firstborn, or the privileged, or the people born in a part of the world where they have been blessed with more resources.

Using stories like this, Jesus challenged the accepted norms of his day and caused people to think about their call to repentance and their need for forgiveness. He preached about justice, about the value of every human being, no matter that they were poor or sinners, and offered his hearers a fresh new perspective. He called them to good stewardship of their resources, gratefulness for the gifts they have received, and a generous spirit of sharing with others who are not so privileged. He calls us to examine our lives and to do the right thing whenever we can. Our God has been generous to us; it is our responsibility to be generous to each other and to do what we can to treat all people with justice.