

## Twentyfourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

The Wisdom and the Cost of Discipleship

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Try as we might, we cannot convince God that we are not worth caring about; we cannot bring God to despair over us.

Certainly there are times in all our lives when we are sorely tempted to despair over ourselves. Times when we feel like the prodigal son. Whether through the tyranny of addiction or after having succumbed to some act of cowardice, whether through a fit of rage, or while under the seductive grip of our own self-absorption, there are times when we may feel that we have squandered our lives, that we have ruined what is most dear to us, and that we have burned our bridges behind us.

The Hebrew word that we translate as “compassion” or “mercy” comes from their word for our inner organs. It refers to our heart, but also to our guts, and in this context, to the womb. In the Hebrew imagination the womb was the seat of a mother’s affection for her child, to their way of thinking, in maternal love, the womb yearns for its own.

Jesus uses this very same language to describe the father’s reaction upon seeing his prodigal son on the road back home. From afar he spies his son coming down the road back home, and he is “deeply moved” literally his “inner parts” stir—his heart skips a beat, his feels a wrench in his gut. It’s as if the father had been keeping an eye out for his son all along, as if he had been restlessly pacing the porch, peering in the distance for any sign of his lost child. And when he finally does catch sight of him the father can’t contain himself. He runs up the road, he throws his arms around him, he kisses him and welcomes him back home.

This story is known as that of the prodigal son, but it could just as well be called the story of the prodigal father. For the father is even more prodigal in his love for his son than his son had been with his father’s money. The son’s prodigality had reached its limit, once he had exhausted his inheritance, he sobered up and returned home. His father’s prodigality however knows no bound, he never gives up on his son.

As the elder son is quick to point out. However one of the few things that could anger Jesus was people who wanted to put limits on God’s mercy, who thought that God’s compassion should remain within reasonable bounds, that God should keep a sense of proportion in the expression of his love for sinners. It is what is creating much of the controversy around Pope Francis. He wants the church to emphasize mercy. One of the first things he did in his pontificate was to declare a Jubilee year of Mercy. But there are plenty who criticize him for going to far, who fear that he is letting just anyone come in. Which, of course is true. It’s the whole point.

On the other hand it is also important to keep in mind that in this story, the prodigal father does not condemn his elder son for his resentment. Rather he hurries out to talk with him just as he had rushed out to meet his lost son on the road. And he reassures

his elder son that his long years of devotion and hard work have not been for nothing. The son has still squandered his inheritance. "All I have is yours" he tells him.

But in expressing his love to his elder son, he also tries to move his son's heart, to stir his guts, to recognize and embrace his own brother. "This son of yours, the elder son bitterly complains dissociating himself from his younger brother altogether, "This son of yours returns after having gone through your property and you kill the fatted calf." "But this brother of yours," his father pleads, "This brother of yours was dead and now has come back to life. This brother of yours was lost and now is found"

Its not that the elder son does not have a point, but that he has mistaken a part of the truth for the whole. True love does involve more than warm embraces and festive banquets. True love also has to include holding one another accountable. The alternative is not love but submission, or distance. The father welcomes back his prodigal son, but he does not replenish his son's funds to make up for what he had thoughtlessly squandered. Their relationship is restored but it does not return to what it was before, as if nothing had happened. But what both sons discover is that while the younger son has lost his inheritance, he had never lost, nor could he ever lose, his father's love. Its been a while since I have quoted one of my favorite spiritual admonitions. It comes from Meister Eckhart, an early Dominican preacher, theologian, novice master and spiritual director. He advises that it is wrong to ever think of God as far from us. If through our sin we cannot but feel far from God, still never think of God as far from us. He is always there, if not in our home, still no further than our front porch, knocking to be let in. Today, for this hour may we take a breath, mute our smart phone, log off social media just for an hour, that our lives might quiet down enough to hear Christ's knock at our door.