

Recently I read a commentary on today’s gospel story commonly titled “The Prodigal Son” that provided me with a fresh perspective.

In the parable we learn that the younger son, after leaving his family and spending his inheritance upon a “life of dissipation,” “found himself in dire need.” Saint Luke brings this message home when he writes that this son “longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed.” It is easy for us to overlook that the older son in the story is also in dire need. He needs his father’s approval and a sign of his love, such as “a young goat to feed on” with his friends. Both sons are needy, the one who dissipated his father’s inheritance and the one who carefully husbanded it. Both sons failed to understand the love of their father, both sons failed in their relationship with him. To understand the invitation of this story and today’s liturgy it is important to see the context of the parable.

St. Luke tells us that “tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus but that the Pharisees and scribes began to complain saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Here are the two sons. All of us can find ourselves in this picture. Most of us, I suspect, are like the older brother, the Pharisees and scribes—good people who strive to lead good moral lives, striving to be faithful to our Catholic faith, its traditions and practices, people who enjoy a good reputation at work, school, here in the parish and wider community. There is certainly nothing wrong or bad about any of this. Indeed, it is good, like the older brother.

Then there are those who we read about, or who we know even in our families, who lead, or who we judge to lead, lives of dissipation—squandering God given talents, perhaps a family inheritance, who have little or no time for organized religious practice, who might even say they don’t even believe in God like the younger brother.

As we know the younger brother “hits bottom” to use a term from addiction treatment programs. His “dire need” more than love for his father, forces his decision to

return home. Yet, even an imperfect love, an imperfect contrition, is enough to elicit from his father full pardon and remission, full restoration to his place as a “son” in the father’s house. Perhaps in order for the son to realize the full love of his father, and for him to love his father for simply being his father instead of for all the “toys and fun” his father’s money could buy, that real joy and real fulfillment in life came only in reaching out in a similar love to his father as his father’s love was for him, he needed pass through the experience of “dire need”, to hit bottom. Often during my years of priesthood I have had people confess, “Father, with the life I’ve led, the things I’ve done, I don’t think even God can forgive me. I’m sorry and I want to do better.” I always respond and assure them, “Welcome home.”

But what of the older brother? He did all the right things. This was his “dire need.” He made obedience to his father not an expression of love, but of grudging daily routine. Because he went to work everyday, kept all the rules, he expected reward. How like us might he be? we who do all the right things; who observe all the laws, traditions and practices of the church. What is our motive for them? Are they a natural outgrowth of a relationship of love for God, or a grudging obedience--a “keeping up of appearances”, but deep in our heart there is an emptiness or bitterness toward life or God? Could we also have a “dire need” to know the love of God not for anything we do, but simply because like the older son everything God is and has is ours; that we are loved by God and God asks nothing more in return than our love?

Today’s first reading tells of the celebration of Passover. The Passover meal celebrated Israel’s freedom from slavery in Egypt. Through the Eucharist Jesus gives us himself as the “feast” to which sinners and saints are welcomed as the children of God. St. Paul urges us today to be “reconciled to God.” Through the Eucharist we, saints or sinners experiences this gift, this grace of God’s unconditional love. Our “dire need” is supplied. “Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.”