

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Sunday, March 10, 2013

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on the Gospel Reading for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

PROMPTING THE PARABLE

This Sunday's Gospel (Luke 15:1-3, 11-32), usually referred to as the "Parable of the Prodigal Son," can be understood in a variety of ways.

We can view it as a story of a father who was willing to give his younger son the freedom to decide his own future and suffer the consequences of that decision. But we can also see it as a story of a father who was afraid to resist his son's outrageous demand for his inheritance before his father's death.

We can view it as a story of a wayward son who has a change of heart, realizes the hurt and pain he has caused his father, and comes home with a contrite spirit. But we can also see it as the story of a manipulative son who returns to his father with a rehearsed speech, not because he is contrite but simply because he is homeless and hungry.

We can view it as a story of an older brother who has been hurt by the selfishness of his brother and justifiably demands his brother be punished for his actions. But we can also see it as the story of a self-righteous older brother who is blind to his own failings and cannot comprehend his father's capacity to forgive and allow his brother a second chance.

Certainly we can make a case for any of those interpretations. But perhaps the best understanding of the parable comes when we look at what prompts Jesus to tell the story in the first place. Just before the parable, Luke writes, "Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

In telling the parable Jesus confronts the complaining Pharisees and scribes and reveals what God is like.

Like the father of the parable, God gives his children the gift of freedom – even the freedom to sin and to walk away from him. God is not a God who controls or limits human choices.

If his wayward children return to him, like the father of the parable, God eagerly embraces them once more – even if their contrition is imperfect and motivated more by self-concern than true repentance. We see that welcoming embrace of God in the ministry of Jesus who freely associated with sinners. He spoke with the shunned woman of Samaria who had gone through five husbands. He invited himself to the house of Zacchaeus, the less than honest tax collector. He even regularly broke bread with Judas, who eventually betrayed him.

By including the older son in the parable, Jesus challenged the self-righteous attitude of those criticizing him. Like that son, the scribes and Pharisees could not comprehend why Jesus would find joy at the return of a sinner. Sinners were to be judged, punished, and excluded. Their return was not a cause for celebration but condemnation.

The parable of the Prodigal Son can be understood in various ways, but perhaps the most wonderful way it can be understood is in light of the words that Luke uses to introduce it. The parable proclaims that we have a God who welcomes his wayward children and delights when they come home, no matter the reason!

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