

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (2022 - C)

As I mentioned these last few weeks, we live in a time of rapid and significant change, and times like ours only come around once every 500 years or so. In times like these, we need a place of stability and order, and that's why I think we need to build a parish ark.

My hope that our parish ark would be a place where we can support each other in living out our Catholic faith, a place where truth and goodness and beauty are preserved and where God is praised. Our parish ark would also be for us (and others) an island of light in a dark world, a beacon of hope, and place of shelter from the storms that rage around us.

I will talk about my ideas on how we can build a parish ark later, but for now, during these Sundays in Lent, I want to talk about something positive and that is our holy Catholic faith, and I also want to talk about something practical, and that is how we can live out our Catholic faith and grow in God's love while living in a society which is moving away from a Christian culture to one which is hostile to religion in general and to Catholicism in particular.

So here is the positive.

Our holy Gospel today begins with this statement, **"Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus."**

Now when you stop and think about this statement, it sounds kind of strange. We know what a sinner is, someone who breaks God's law, but why are tax collectors lumped in here? The reason is because they were the lowest of the low. They were the ones who were willing to collaborate with the hated Romans and spy on their neighbors and make sure that every last penny they made was accounted for and taxed. For that, the tax collectors were hated and despised by the rest of the people.

To give you an idea of how despised and hated they were, if your brother was a tax collector, you wouldn't invite him to your son's wedding. If your neighbor was a tax collector, you wouldn't greet him on the street or wish him good day.

So, we see **"Tax collectors and sinners ... drawing near to listen to Jesus."** In reaction to this, the Scribes and Pharisees began to complain and say, **"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."**

Their object was to discredit Jesus, and so, they pointed out to all the Jewish people who kept the law that Jesus was hanging around with those who were unclean and worse, traitors to the nation and to God's chosen people.

In response, our Lord told the parable of the Prodigal Son. Now this story has three main characters. The loving Father who represents God. The Prodigal Son who represents all sinners, but especially serious sinners (by the way, prodigal means someone who spends money foolishly). And the Older Son who represents those who are seeking to do God's will.

In this parable, we learn first that God is rich in mercy. Just think about the younger son. In his arrogance and indifference to the feelings of his father, he demanded he be given his inheritance, his half of his father's estate. He even made his demand before his father has died, and without having lifted a finger to help with the duties and work on the farm.

Then, after his father gives the son half the value of the estate in cash, the son leaves without even telling his father where he was going or how he could be reached. From that point on, the son burns through the money on wine, women and song until he finds himself broke.

No more fun and games now. No more friends either, and no more food. He finally ends up feeding pigs. This was very humiliating because to the Jews, pigs were unclean animals. At this point, in desperation, he resolved to return home and ask his father's forgiveness and hope that he be allowed to work on the farm.

When his father saw him returning, contrite and humble, he was overjoyed and all was forgiven. The son was restored to his former place and there was a great celebration. We see here the great mercy of God. The son was punished more by the knowledge of what he had done and of how he had behaved than by his father. So too with us and God.

Another thing we can learn from this parable is the great love God has for us. He made us to live with Him, and He does not want us to separate ourselves from Him. Yes, we can walk away from God because God has given us freedom. You and I are not like a bird in a cage or a dog on a chain. We are free to do as we wish. We can choose either good or evil.

Yet, even when we turn away, God still loves us and invites us to return. Furthermore, when a sinner returns, there is great rejoicing because the one who was dead has returned to life and the one who was lost has been found.

So the positive thing is that God is rich in mercy and that He will never stop loving us.

Ok, now for the practical.

You may recall that last Sunday, I said that we must have a great love for the truth and that truth is what corresponds to reality, to what really is. Also, the opposite of truth is falsity or incorrectness where falsity is when what is said or believed does not correspond to reality, it is not what really is.

Now the reason we must have a great love for the truth, and the reason we must hold tight to the truth and never let go of it is simple. When we hold on to the truth, we are holding on to Jesus, and through Him, we will come to know the Father. Recall what Jesus said to Pontius Pilate, **"For this reason I was born and have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to My voice (Jn 18:37)."** Recall He also said, **"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (Jn 14:6)."**

That said, we are surrounded today by dishonesty and lies on a grand scale. We are lied to constantly about nearly all of the great truths of life. Last week I mentioned one of these lies, the elevation of the rights of individuals over the rights of everyone else. Essentially, this lie rejects the second greatest commandment, that we must love our neighbor as ourself.

Today, let's look at another lie. Just like the prodigal son, many today think you can tell God what to do, that you can demand things from God. In other words, in dealing with God, you can approach Him as an equal; essentially, you can approach Him with pride and arrogance.

As just one example of this, consider that many people today do not worship God at all. Even though they depend upon God for everything, even for their very lives, they behave as if they owe nothing to God. In their arrogance, they simply ignore Him.

Others do worship God but on their own terms. I am spiritual but not religious they say, or I pray to God in the woods or when I am on a walk. But how is that pleasing to God? Where did they get the idea (or better) the right to decide how they are going to worship God?

That may sound like a strange question to our ears, but the fact is that God has always been the one who decides how He wants to be worshiped. God instructed Moses on how the Passover meal was to be prepared. Later, He gave explicit instructions on how the temple Sacrifice was to be offered even down to the vestments the priests were to wear. Finally, to the Apostles and to us, at the Last Supper our Lord said, "Do this in memory of me."

So, we have neither the right nor the authority to decide how we are going to worship God. He has decided that for us. It is simple for us to humbly obey or arrogantly disobey.

This lie that we can demand things from God and tell Him what to do also shows up when people decide what is right or wrong without reference to the commandments.

The prodigal son reveals how we should approach God. In humility. Conscious of our sins. We should approach God and say "Father, I have sinned against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son."

Now this is not easy. It's humiliating because it sounds too much like cowering or groveling. It goes against all that we hear from our world today. You are special. You are always right. You are in charge. You have the right to choose. It hurts our pride.

Yet, unless we acknowledge that we have sinned and no longer deserve to be called the son or the daughter of God, how can God show us mercy? How can He raise us up? How can He put the finest robe on us? How can He put a ring on our finger and how can all of heaven celebrate if the one who was spiritually dead has not come to life again?

So then, let us reject the lie that we can approach God in arrogance. Instead, let us hold to the great truth that we are sinners who have broken God's laws and commandments. Let us hold to the truth that we must approach God in humility and lowliness. Then, and only then, can God raise us up and be merciful to us and shower upon us His great and abiding love. Amen.