

## The Prodigal Family

When you hear the story of the Prodigal son do you hear the gut twisting, shake us to our roots story that Jesus tells; or do you hear something like the old Tony Orlando and Dawn song: "Tie a Yellow Ribbon?"

You remember that old hit.

The man is finishing up his time in jail and writes to his sweetie that while he'll understand if she's through with him, if she's willing to give him another chance, well, he'll be coming through by bus, and he'll keep going unless he sees that she's tied a yellow ribbon around the old oak tree.

As you know, when the bus pulls into town, the tree is full of yellow ribbons and we all tear up at the sweetness of it all.

(For those of you too young to remember the 1970's, whenever you see a magnetic yellow ribbon remembering the troops on someone's car, well, it's that song that started off the hole shebang).

I once heard a sermon about today's gospel that pretty much traded what Jesus has to say for what Tony Orlando sang, except in the sermon, the wayfaring boy asks dad to put a light on in the window if he can come home – and when the boy shows up, the whole house is lit up like a Christmas tree.

All really sweet; quite sentimental actually, yet neither Tony's song nor that sermon have a THING to do with what Jesus is talking about.

When we began our season of Lent, on Ash Wednesday, we began by borrowing an example from Fr. Bob Capon comparing how most folks (including most Christians) see our faith, as compared to the faith that Jesus invites us into.

For those of you who couldn't make it on Ash Wednesday, I will summarize.

For those who were here, you can check your email or surf the web for the next minute or two.

Fr. Capon says that the common grasp on Christianity is like folks swimming at the beach when the ocean suddenly gets rough.

The lifeguard starts clearing the water.

Suddenly a boy yells out that a little girl is still in the ocean, and she's in trouble.

The lifeguard – Jesus -- races out into the ocean, grabs the little girl, who (for the sake of some drama) has stopped breathing.

CPR is performed and she is revived.

Everyone is pleased, everyone thanks Jesus for his heroic rescue operation, and then, folks get back to their picnics and games.

Some mention how stupid the girl was to be in the water in the first place, and others will comment on her irresponsible parents, while still others will thank God that it wasn't their child who came so close to drowning.

Despite the drama, everyone gets back to life as usual and no one is really changed.

That, says Fr. Capon, is the common view of our faith.

People in trouble are rescued while the rest of us look on, throw some judgment around and then chalk it up to a good day when the rescue succeeds.

But that's not Christianity.

That's Tony Orlando.

Christianity is more like this.

We still have Jesus the lifeguard warning everyone to get out of the rough surf.

We still have the boy hollering about the floundering girl.

But this time, when the lifeguard goes out to save the little girl, both lifeguard and the little girl drown.

When some people go back to the lifeguard tower, they find a note from the lifeguard saying:

“The little girl is safe in my death.”

There is wonder, and there is mystery, and for those who sit with the implications of that note, they are forever changed.

The story we have today is another example given by Jesus of what it means to give up to get, to let go in order to receive, to die in order to really live.

When we get serious about today’s gospel, the first punch in the gut is that the father commits suicide.

You say you missed that part?

It’s right there in the reading.

It happens right after the younger son says to his dad: “You’re dead to me now, so give me what’s coming.”

I remember a few years ago a friend of mine came to talk to me and her head was nearly exploding.

It seems her youngest brother had demanded from her folks his inheritance, and he wanted it right now.

My friend was furious at her self-centered spoiled rotten brother.

Naturally, the parents told the boy to drop dead – he’d get his share after they died, not a minute sooner.

Which is what you’d expect from the dad in today’s gospel.

But, instead of telling the upstart to drop dead: it’s dad who drops dead: by dividing his living between the two boys.

I know our translation says the father “divided his property between them,” but the more literal translation is the father “divided **his living** between them.”

The father is now dead to all that he was.

And then there is the older son.

At first blush, it seems we don't have a problem with the elder brother until we get to the very end of the story.

But if you listen carefully, you have a problem with him right from the start.

He doesn't object, like my friend did, to the younger brother's demand – in fact, he stands by and takes his share too while dear old dad is still walking around, because the dad “divided his living **between** them.”

We'll get back to the older brother in a minute.

But, the story begins with the dad dying – he gives up all he has.

No yellow ribbons so far.

Meanwhile, Junior is off to the races in pagan territory having cashed in dad's living.

Junior is in a hurry to sell everything quickly because in small villages like this one, word travels fast; and you can imagine what the neighbors think about this kid and his self-centered scheme.

As you know, he blows what he has and ends up in pretty much the worst spot a Jewish boy can end up in: broke, in the midst of a famine, with no family to help out.

As it says in the Greek, he “glues himself” to some pagan pig farmer and gets to the point where he's not only tending pigs (a huge NO NO for his culture) but he wishes he were a pig, so he can eat their food!

But as bad as things are, he's not dead yet.

Instead, Plan A is to figure out how to fill his stomach: thus the “I have sinned against heaven and against you!” line– which – as you know from your Old Testament class, is the same fake repentance that Pharaoh belched out to Moses in the midst of the plagues – and then the clincher – “treat me as a hired servant!”

So off he goes, and when he appears over the horizon, the father does what no self-respecting Middle Eastern man would ever do (or, I suggest, under the circumstances, something none of us would do either) – he hikes up his robe, exposes his legs, and dashes toward his son: falling on his neck, kissing him....

The boy blurts out his confession of sin – but he doesn't get to the part of being treated as a servant -- not because the father cuts him off, but because – in the face of the overwhelming love poured out by the father – the boy really does finally die to the illusion that he can have some life other than being his father's son.

He died as a son when he began this whole sorry mess.

Planning his comeback, he thinks he can recreate himself into a servant.

But now he has come to see that the only life he can ever or will ever have – exists only and solely and exclusively **as a son** and only and solely and exclusively because the **father loves him**.

He exists only in the father's love.

Without the father's love, he is nothing.

Which was always the case, except he needed to die to the illusions of his self-sufficiency and his own best thinking -- before he can see the truth that was always there, standing right before his eyes.

So the dead dad, whose dead son is now wearing the finest robe and the signet ring and some marvelous red and yellow shoes, head in for the biggest party of the year – where the neighbors, following the father's lead, welcome the son back home with music and laughter and song.

Which leaves us with one last character who isn't yet dead: the Boy Scout, Mr. Prim and Proper, the Chairman of the Committee on Rules and Regulations.

After grilling the neighborhood boys about the cause of all the ruckus, he begins to pout.

He's supposed to be in the party, greeting his dad's guests, schmoozing with the neighbors and at least pretending to have a good time: his culture and custom demand that, even if he is mad.

But he won't.

So here comes dad, who leaves the party – a huge embarrassment in that culture, made all the worse by older son fanning the flames of a family feud in front of the guests – and once again, dad doesn't beat the insolent son – he doesn't threaten him either – instead - he pleads with the son in love.

And what do we see?

The younger son, who has died, moves from being a servant to a son, and the older son, who refuses to die to his own wounded ego, moves from being a son to a servant!

“All these years I've been working as a slave for you, and I can't get a goat sandwich much less the veal that's roasting for that son of yours!” he shouts, and in the shouting, denouncing his son ship – apparently forgetting that he's already the owner of the whole shooting match – ever since Junior left for Vegas – and what he fails to see is that the veal is being cooked not because dad loves Junior more, but because dad is over the moon with joy!

And there the story ends, with one of the three characters still not dead – still demanding his “rights”, still living in the fantasy that he is in charge of his destiny.

And the question that Jesus leaves hanging is:

Will he die to his ego and false pride and sense of entitlement and join the party or will he stand outside, alone and angry?

That's the question Jesus leaves with us.

Now before I sit down, there's one more death we need to talk about.

It's the death of the Jesus character in the story.

Of all the characters in the story, which is most like Jesus?

To me, Jesus is the fatted calf – the one who is slaughtered so those who are willing to die can have the party in the first place.

As it says in the Book of Revelation:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals because you were slaughtered, and at the cost of your own blood you have purchased for God people from every tribe and language and people and nation. Rev. 5:6

Jesus is the fatted calf: by his death, we are alive!

We hear this story in Lent because it's during Lent that our attention is directed most often, most profoundly, to dying.

And so perhaps we might ask this morning: to what do I need to die?

What pride or arrogance or wounded feeling or sense of entitlement or self-righteous anger or fear do I need to die to?

And on a broader note: what nationalism or consumerism or sexism or stinginess or racism do I need to die to; so that, arm in arm with the once dead and now risen younger brother, with the once dead and now risen dad, we too might finally be ready to step on in to the greatest party ever thrown:

It's going on just around the corner, right around the bend -- in that raucous banquet hall called the Kingdom of God!

+amen

