

3rd SUNDAY OF THE LENT - C
“Welcome to the Table!”

This is the most well known story Jesus ever told. We Christians know it by heart. And anyone who has heard of the gospel of Jesus will remember this story. We call it the Story of the Prodigal Son, but, if we listen closely, it is really the story of the Prodigal Father. Yes, the younger son was reckless in the way he squandered his father’s inheritance. But any well informed Jew would conclude that his father was far more reckless in the way he took his son back. The kid figured that he would be better off back home as a slave than he would be eating with pigs in a foreign land. But his father, who, by the cultural custom, should have shunned his son and should have treated him as dead, runs out to meet him, puts a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. In other words, he takes him back not as a slave but as a son. The father is extravagant in his mercy. It is unheard of, so much so that the first hearers of this story had to have been shocked.

But that’s only half the story. We are so moved by the father’s mercy that we forget about the older son. When the no-good son returns and the father throws a party for him, the elder son won’t have anything to do with it, and the reason is because he will have nothing to do with his younger brother, whom he refers to only as the “father’s son,” not his brother at all. He’s madder than hell that his stupid younger brother would get such treatment. Notice, the issue isn’t the party, it’s the fact that his brother is in there. Has his father gone mad? What going on here?

The key to what’s going on is why Jesus told this story in the first place. The Pharisees and scribes noticed that tax collectors and sinners were not only gathering to listen to Jesus, but that Jesus even welcomed them and, what is worse, he ate with them. This parable is about the heart of God. It’s

about the love of a father for all his children, regardless of what they have done. Jesus is really revealing what is going on inside of his heart when he sees sinners, the marginalized and the excluded.

This is what got Jesus into so much trouble with the authorities. Jesus excluded no one from his table. Father Bryan Massingale, a priest who gave the keynote address on Saturday morning of the L.A. Religious Education Congress, said that Jesus' vision of the New World was symbolized by the open table. Those with whom he eats at table are the people Jesus loves, and he excludes no one. He ate with them all, rich and poor, powerful and weak, important socially and the outcast. Father Massingale says that the real scandal is not that Jesus ate with everyone, but rather that he ate with anyone! Yet, the only ones excluded from the table are those who excluded themselves because they, in effect, couldn't stomach all those others at table with Jesus. They are symbolized by the older son in this story.

Because of those who ate at table with him, Jesus was cast out of the synagogue, betrayed and killed. That is how dangerous this kind of vision is. But what if we Catholics had this kind of vision ourselves? Or, as Father Massingale asked, "*What if we Catholics believed our own message?*" He said that we have all been formed and malformed to think that unlike things do not go together, and that some people are better than others. This is why Jesus' message offends our sense of propriety. We are more formed by our culture than the Gospel.

- Why do I have to sit by them?
- Why don't they have their own parish?
- What are they doing here?
- Why do we sing their songs? They're not even here.
- Who do those kids think they are?
- Why is she going to Holy Communion?

- Why is a woman doing that?

Jesus' vision is just too much for us, so we compromise his message. Yet, it always finds a way to break through. And when we think about it, we are among the outcasts ourselves. Jesus invites us to his table, and none of us measures up. We even say before receiving Holy Communion, "*Lord, I am not worthy.*" We either mean it or we don't. If we mean it, then who are we to be so picky about who comes to the table with us? We would not be at the table at all if Jesus had not welcomed us here. Sunday after Sunday, it is like we are rehearsing to do it better; like we are practicing for the Eternal Banquet of the Kingdom.

As followers of Jesus we are invited not only to his table, but also to allow his Spirit to transform our hearts to be more like his. How blessed we are to have so many different races and ethnic groups in our parish. God certainly has a wide idea of beauty. The fact that we can become friends is a way for us to delight in those differences. And when we press the issue, the real language of our unity is neither English nor Latin, but the Word of God. When we speak the ways of love and inclusiveness, there is no place for words like domination, segregation, superiority or unwelcome. And when we are free of these sins against our humanity, we will experience communion. We will taste a bit of the Kingdom. We will know a peace the world cannot give. Then we will be all we were meant to be. Then we will be our best selves; then we will be fully human.

We have much work to do, don't we; much surrendering to the God who gives us life? May the Eucharist we celebrate today continue the transformation of our hearts.