
WORD MADE FLESH

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Exodus 32:7-11,13-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32

Welcomed Home*

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Few texts in the scripture highlight the transformation the Gospel of Christ works in us with more poignancy than the parables Jesus tells the Pharisees and the scribes in today's reading. The parable of the lost sheep and the good shepherd who goes in search of the one that is lost in the wilderness and the parable of the women and the lost coin prepare us to hear the story of the prodigal son.

At first blush the parable of the prodigal son is a welcome story. We long to see happy endings to what looks like tragedy. The son, in the passion of youth, running off and squandering his inheritance, falling on hard times and returning to be greeted by the open arms of his father. But read on. The elder son is angered by the joy that greets his brother's return. The young man had squandered his youth while the elder brother remained faithful to the tasks at hand.

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This Gospel reading invites us to ponder the three figures in the story. In the normal run of life many of us are the elder brother, appearing stable and committed to the routine of household and community, doing our duty, usually unbidden and with a modest amount of contentment. We work to preserve the present and build the future. Of such is the "kingdom of self-righteousness." This, we say in our heart, is what makes the world purposeful and liveable. And, of course, we are right and say, with the Pharisees and scribes, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

For some of us, the prodigal son is known deep in our memory. We recall the times when we have taken our spiritual inheritance - our gifts, sense of virtue, hopes, dreams, desires - and used them for what appeared to be the happiness of life. We collected experiences, moments of enjoyment, all masked as self-discovery.

If we were fortunate, we found ourselves again as the prodigal did. We awoke in a foreign land, in bondage to necessities brought on by our own passions. We glimpsed ourselves feeding with the animals. Our first thought is like the prodigal's. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am not longer worth to be called you son; treat me like one of your hired hands." We to longed to be welcomed back as sinner and have someone eat with us.

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

The father in the parable speaks to us from the depth of our heart. Every day he went out of the gate, looked longingly down the road and woes the loved one. No thought of squandered patrimony. Only the

simple direct love for the life of the child.

Today we are invited, as prodigal and elder son, to listen to the depth of our heart's yearning and set the banquet table for the expected return of "he who was lost and is now found."

David J. Goa

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