

Father O'Connor's Homily for 27 March 2022  
Fourth Sunday of Lent – C

Joshua 5: 9a, 10-12  
2 Corinthians 5: 17-21  
Luke 15: 1-3, 11-32

A high school student was assigned to read a Shakespeare play, “The Merchant of Venice.” To his great surprise he discovered that he actually liked it except, he complained, “that it was full of trite sayings like, ‘All that glitters is not gold’” [Act 2, Scene 7]. Of course, the student had it backwards. Shakespeare is the originator of these sayings, not the one who made them trite.

We can have the same problem with today's parable. It has become trite because we have heard it and its phrases so often, such as ‘the prodigal son’ and “the fattened calf.”

Still, there are valuable lessons for life in this famous story. And so today I would like to look at it with you from, perhaps, a little different angle. I would like to talk about the three sinners in the story, especially the elder son.

The elder son justifiably complained to his father, “Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends.” And his father admitted, “My son, you are here with me always. Everything I have is yours.”

Elder son is obedient. He is there when you need him. You don't have to chase after him or nag him. He is the kind of child that parents dream of. And all this means that his wonderfully-forgiving father is not entirely without his faults. Where has he failed? He has taken his elder son for granted.

When was the last time he praised his elder son, told him that he is grateful, that he is proud of him? Even more, that he loves him? When? Well, never in this story.

We can identify with the elder son and sympathize with him. Who is he like? He is the mother who keeps the family together physically and emotionally but who is taken for granted, like an unpaid servant. He is the father who works hard to support his family, putting in long hours, sacrificing his own wants and pleasures, so that his kids can receive a good education, but who is taken for granted.

He is the loyal worker who is there every day, who takes no phony sick days, giving time and attention over-and-above what is required, and who is taken for granted. He is the teacher who stays after the last bell, the crossing guard in the

stormy weather, the coach rushing home from work to make the game, the postal worker who delivers mail through the snow and the rain, the nurse on the midnight shift, the first-responder who always arrives, the friend that you can count on. Elder son's good qualities are found in all these people who can easily be taken for granted.

And then, let someone who is ordinarily self-centered, manipulative or uncaring do a good deed almost by accident, or do something decent for perhaps the first time in their lives – and the whole world throws them a party. And the elder sons and daughters of this world look on and shake their heads: “It’s just not fair!”

You see, there is plenty of sin to go around in this parable. There is the sin of younger son, known as “the prodigal,” who insulted his father and then ran away, hurting his father deeply. And there is the sin of the father who graciously forgave this younger son, but who failed to hug his elder son and tell him how much he appreciated his obedience and dependability. And the sin of elder son? It is a sin that can sometimes plague even good people. It is the sin of a hardened heart and a brooding spirit.

So often appreciation evaporates as our faithful deeds are taken for granted. Our dedication can be forgotten as another moves in to take our place. It is an insecurity that we all can have: thinking that “if someone else goes up on the seesaw of life, we must go down.” And when we are down there, no one thanks us or even notices. We can feel a twinge of resentment and hurt, even as we try to force a smile.

But as we travel the road of discipleship, we must resist this hardened heart, this brooding spirit. Because if we don't, sooner or later we will become like the elder son who let it get to him so badly that he would not even enter the family home, which was a grave insult in that culture. He could not even bring himself to call his sibling “brother” – instead he used the cold phrase, “*your* son.” And worst of all, he could not rejoice in the God-given grace of reconciliation that his brother had received, or in the lavish display of his father's affection for a sinner who is forgiven and has come home.

The truth is that even good people can struggle with the sin of a hardened heart and a brooding spirit. But we can go a long way toward personal peace and security if we remember that God is always in charge, that God sees the good that we do, and that God never takes us for granted.

God invites us to rejoice wherever beauty, truth and goodness reveal themselves – even in arrogant prodigal sons and daughters – because that is what

makes us most like the One who send sends His rain on the just and the unjust alike.

So a round of notice and appreciation for the good that the elder son does. He just needs to soften his heart and stop his pouting. And to remember his father's lavishly-generous words to him: "My son, you are here with me *always*. Everything I have – *everything* – is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again. He was lost and has been found. Now come with me inside our family home *and be a part of the celebration.*"