



FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

CYCLE C

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

GATHERING

(A lighted candle, a plate of hot cross buns and a dish of preserves rest on a table covered with a purple cloth.)

Last week, we reflected on God's relentless pursuit of us. That theme continues this week, as God is depicted as a loving Father waiting and longing for the return of his wayward son. *(Members spend several minutes sharing how they responded to God's pursuit of them during the past week.)*

OPENING PRAYER

(The leader invites the community to several minutes of quiet prayer. After several minutes a member of the group reads the following poem.)

Member: Sweet brother, if I do not sleep
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;
And if I cannot eat my bread,
My fast shall live like willows where you died.
If in the heat, I find no water for my thirst,
My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveler.

Where, in what desolate and smokey country,
Lies your poor body, lost and dead?
And in what landscape of disaster
Has your unhappy spirit lost its road?

Come, in my labor find a resting place
And in my sorrows lay your head,
Or rather take my life and blood
Or take my breath and take my death
And buy yourself a better rest.

When all the men of war are shot
And flags have fallen into dust,
Your cross and mine shall tell men still
Christ died on each for both of us.

For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain,
And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring:
The money of whose tears shall fall
Into your weak and friendless hand,

And buy you back to your own land:
The silence of whose tears shall fall
Like bells upon your alien tomb.
Hear them and come: they call you home.

Thomas Merton. *Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Paperback, 1959), pp. 12-13.

(After a suitable pause the leader continues.)

Leader: Spirit of wisdom, inspiration of minds and hearts,
Direct science and technology
To the service of life, justice and peace.
Render fruitful our dialogue with the followers
Of other religions, lead the different cultures
To appreciate the values of the Gospel.

All: .Come, Spirit of love and peace!

Leader: Spirit of life, by whose power the Word was made flesh
In the womb of the Virgin Mary; the woman of
Attentive silence, make us docile to the promptings
Of your love and ever ready to accept the signs of
The times which you place along the paths of history.

All: Come, Spirit of love and peace!

From the official prayer for the second year of millennial preparation by the Holy Father

Focus Question

When have you pouted because of somebody's good fortune?

SCRIPTURE SHARING AND REFLECTION

Commentary

What is God really like? Jesus spent most of his time on earth trying to answer that question. Luke's story of the forgiving father, told by Jesus in response to criticism that he, "welcomes sinners and eats with them," is another attempt by Jesus to form a new image of God in the minds and hearts of his listeners.

In the story, the younger son's conduct, according to the standards of the day, is outrageous. He anticipates the death of his father by demanding his inheritance in advance. Receiving it, he leaves home and squanders the money in dishonorable ways. Finally he ends up penniless and starving, caring for pigs, unclean animals that as a Jew he should not even touch, let alone eat! His decision to return home is not based on remorse but desperation.

Traditionally this story has been called, *The Prodigal Son*. This is unfortunate because the central character in the parable is the father.

The prodigal has to do with lavish abundance. The love of God according to Jesus is lavishly abundant. The father runs out to meet his son. He embraces him and kisses him. The reason for the son's return doesn't matter. The son's transgressions don't matter. There are no words

of reproach. There is no punishment, no demand for recompense. The son is made completely welcome and is fully restored to his position in the family. As a final expression of total forgiveness the father prepares a banquet to celebrate his son's return.

The older son, the third character in the story, provides an interesting counterpoint to the father. This *good son* resents his father's generosity and forgiveness. His conduct, it seems, is motivated by duty, not love, so he cannot understand the *prodigal* love of his father. Perhaps he is afraid that his father loves his younger brother more than he loves him. The tragedy of this *good son* is that despite years of living with his father he doesn't really know him.

The story of *The Prodigal Father* can be a great solace for us when we fail. It tells us that we don't have to be perfect to come to God. It tells us that God will embrace us where we are.

FAITH SHARING AND INTEGRATION

1. How do these scriptures affirm or challenge your image of God, as Father?
2. What has been your experience of forgiveness? How do you bring that experience to others?
3. How does your parish mirror the *prodigal* love of the Father to those who feel lost or alienated?
4. How does the outreach of your small Christian community give flesh to this boundless love of God in our world?
5. What have been some of the manifestations of God's *prodigal* love in your life?

RESPONSE IN ACTION

1. Set aside some times this week to reflect on God's *prodigal* love for you.

2. Reach out as a community to someone who feels alienated from the Church. Consider inviting that person to join your small Christian community.
3. Support an outreach ministry in your area to people with AIDS.

SENDING FORTH

(The leader invites the members to several minutes of quiet prayer.)

All: God of true freedom,
we give you thanks and praise for Christ,
who is the light that scatters our darkness.
When we sinned and turned to evil deeds,
you remained close to us,
calling us back to your grace.
This night and forever,
we are awed by the passion of your love
made manifest in Jesus.
All praise and thanks be yours
through the Holy Spirit
forever and ever. Amen.

Edward F. Gabriel. **Prayers For Dawn and Dusk** (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1992) p. 107.

(The leader invites all to "taste and see the goodness of the Lord," by sharing the hot cross buns and the preserves along with some liquid refreshment.)