

**031807 FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT**

I have a story to share with you – it is rather a long story and it is one that makes me emotional in my heart; sometimes that emotion comes to the surface. I believe this to be true -- let me tell you this as I heard it told....

A priest went to Rome and he was in a situation where he was given a special papal audience invitation to come the next day as one of the people who could come to kneel at the feet of the Holy Father. It would be very brief: kneel in front of the Pope, receive his blessing and say a few words, “Thank you Holy Father.” And then get up and leave. I saw this very thing happen when I visited Rome in 2004. I didn’t get to kneel in front of him and receive his blessing, but I had a prime seat for the Wednesday General Audience with the Pope.

At any rate – the priest who was invited to be a part of this special up-close and personal audience with the pope – he had time before this next day event. So he, the priest went about touring some of the sites in Rome. At one of the basilicas he went to visit, as he arrived at the top of the steps, he noticed a poor man – a silent beggar... and there are many of them... many of them in Rome. The priest was about to walk past – but he did a double take at this one beggar. He went up to him and said, “Who are you – you look familiar.” The man didn’t answer right away and the priest said again: “I think I know you – who are you.” The beggar said he was a former priest – in fact they had gone to seminary together for a year in Italy long before they were ordained.

When pushed for details, the beggar said he had sinned and he had given up his faith. He had given up being a priest... and he only wanted a handout for he was in dire need.

They reestablished a little bit of knowledge of each other – exchanged names and contact information – although there wasn't much info about the beggar.... And then the priest left to go inside and tour the basilica.

The next day – the visiting priest went early – very early so he could be at St. Peter's for the general audience with the Holy Father. The priest was seated in a close up chair – with good visibility to the pope. And after the greetings and teaching and some words by the Holy Father – those in these special seats were invited to come forward... kneel, accept the blessing and then leave.

When the priest received the blessing of the Holy Father – as he got up – he blurted out some words to this effect... “Holy Father – there is a priest – a former priest – I met him at a basilica near here... he has left the priesthood... I ask you to please pray for him... please...” The visiting priest then got up and started to walk away. He didn't see the Holy Father motion to an aide near him. After the aide listened to the Pope, he hurriedly moved and stopped the departing priest. The aide said that the Holy Father wanted to invite both the visiting priest and the former priest to come to dinner the next night. The representative of the Holy Father got all the necessary information, gave instructions about where and what time the two priests should arrive.

So then the visiting priest who instigated this – he had to go find the lapsed priest, the beggar and to convince him this was true – convince him that the Pope – the real Holy Father wanted to see them, etc. They got some clean clothes for the lapsed priest.

The visiting priest had the beggar priest come to his hotel and take a shower and clean up... I'm rushing this story as much as I can... That evening – they both showed up at a certain door at the Vatican. They knocked – the door opened and they gave their names. Sure enough the person had a sheet with their names on it. They were escorted down corridors and up steps until they were ushered into a dining room... and after some five minutes, Holy Father JP II enters.

They begin to have dinner – the beggar priest was, of course most nervous and didn't say a lot. At the end of the main course – the Holy Father motioned to the visiting priest that he should leave the room. He did so, and outside he was told to wait until he was summoned back into the dining room.

About twenty minutes go by – and finally the door is opened and the first priest is invited back into the dining room. He sees that the lapsed priest looks emotional... different ... he wonders what happened. Pope John Paul II invites them to have dessert and they spend time in general conversation... And then the evening is over.

The two priests bid goodnight to the Holy Father and they leave. Outside on the streets below – as they walk – the visiting priest says, "If you can tell me – what happened inside?"

Well said the beggar priest, “the Holy Father asked me if I would hear his confession.” I said, “Holy Father I’m a sinner... I am a former priest – without faculties or standing.” The Holy Father said, “You are a priest forever... and I can reinstate you right now if you ask me.” “Yes Holy Father... Yes... please reinstate me.”

So he did so – and then he again asked me to hear his confession.” The first priest – in astonishment at this turn of events said... “You did this? You heard his confession? Did it take so long?” “Oh no – it was over in a few moments. What took longer was when I asked him if he would hear my confession – that is what took so long... Well I went to Confession and after it was over, he hugged me in his arms... He welcomed me back into the family.”

I would like to paraphrase some of the words in today’s Gospel. The son said, “I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. And when he was still a long way off, his father heard of him, and he was filled with compassion. He made arrangements for a reunion. And when they had their reunion meeting, the father embraced him and kissed him. ‘Quick... bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.” The robe and the ring are symbols of restored honor and dignity. They are signs of full restoration to the family of the Father. I share this story for any who feel like they don’t believe in the necessity of going to Confession to a priest.... to a father....

I share this story in case there is anyone who believes they cannot be reconciled – THERE IS MERCY. I share this story in case someone is mired in sin and doesn't believe he or she can break free. THERE IS HOPE. I share this story in case there is anyone here who believes they don't have any real sin in their lives. I share this story to so that you COME TO KNOW TRUTH.

In my own life, all too often, I get to feeling like the lapsed priest in the story I shared with you. But I've also come to know of the Sacramental embrace that says that my dignity is restored... I am given the ring and the cloak -- and so, too can you.

And now some closing words about all this. We have some among us who because of certain life circumstances – they may not be able to (or they ought not to) receive the Holy Eucharist. They can have a powerful and a very real experience of Christ inside of them by virtue of praying for a spiritual union with Jesus – for Him to come into their hearts. AND similarly, there are some who, for reasons too long to get into here – they may not be able to receive Sacramental Confession and Reconciliation. Let them repent of their sins – let them convert their hearts – and then let them demonstrate the power of God's mercy by the new lives they begin to lead. They too, find mercy and forgiveness.

Finally – we all – we all need to repent of our failings with one another. And as Scripture tells us – let us confess our sins to each other. Let us humble ourselves before our brothers and sisters.

Today – you and I are invited to a banquet – a banquet of forgiveness and love and mercy... Remember what they said of Jesus -- This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Look to him that you may be radiant with joy, and your face may not blush with shame. As Paul wrote in the letter we heard proclaimed, “all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

And for each and every one of us – without exception – the way to Easter is through Jerusalem... and the pathway to Jerusalem is through the confessional. I would like to paraphrase some words from the Servant of God Catherine Doherty. She said, “In Christ, each new day is a day of starting new with God.” A fresh slate – available to us, every time we repent and confess... we are reconciled to the Father.

Psalm: Sunday 10

Reading 1

Jos 5:9a, 10-12

The LORD said to Joshua,

“Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you.”

While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho,  
they celebrated the Passover  
on the evening of the fourteenth of the month.

On the day after the Passover,  
they ate of the produce of the land  
in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain.

On that same day after the Passover,  
on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased.  
No longer was there manna for the Israelites,  
who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7

R. (9a) Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I will bless the LORD at all times;  
his praise shall be ever in my mouth.

Let my soul glory in the LORD;

the lowly will hear me and be glad.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Glorify the LORD with me,

let us together extol his name.

I sought the LORD, and he answered me

and delivered me from all my fears.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Look to him that you may be radiant with joy,

and your faces may not blush with shame.

When the poor one called out, the LORD heard,

and from all his distress he saved him.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

## Reading II

### 2 Cor 5:17-21

Brothers and sisters:

Whoever is in Christ is a new creation:

the old things have passed away;

behold, new things have come.

And all this is from God,

who has reconciled us to himself through Christ

and given us the ministry of reconciliation,

namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ,

not counting their trespasses against them

and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

So we are ambassadors for Christ,  
as if God were appealing through us.

We implore you on behalf of Christ,  
be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin,  
so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Gospel

Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus,  
but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying,  
“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So to them Jesus addressed this parable:

“A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father,  
‘Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’

So the father divided the property between them.

After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings  
and set off to a distant country

where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation.

When he had freely spent everything,

a severe famine struck that country,

and he found himself in dire need.

So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens

who sent him to his farm to tend the swine.

And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed,  
but nobody gave him any.

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Coming to his senses he thought,  
'How many of my father's hired workers  
have more than enough food to eat,  
but here am I, dying from hunger.  
I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him,  
"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.  
I no longer deserve to be called your son;  
treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."  
So he got up and went back to his father.  
While he was still a long way off,  
his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion.  
He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.  
His son said to him,  
'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you;  
I no longer deserve to be called your son.'  
But his father ordered his servants,  
'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him;  
put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.  
Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.  
Then let us celebrate with a feast,  
because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again;  
he was lost, and has been found.'  
Then the celebration began.  
Now the older son had been out in the field  
and, on his way back, as he neared the house,  
he heard the sound of music and dancing.  
He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean.

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The servant said to him,  
'Your brother has returned  
and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf  
because he has him back safe and sound.'  
He became angry,  
and when he refused to enter the house,  
his father came out and pleaded with him.  
He said to his father in reply,  
'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.  
But when your son returns  
who swallowed up your property with prostitutes,  
for him you slaughter the fattened calf.'  
He said to him,  
'My son, you are here with me always;  
everything I have 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.'"