

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT 032506

Well –the first reading from Exodus tells us about the Law – the Commandments delivered to Moses. We don't hear them talked about that much, do we? Well – let me remind you – there are Ten Commandments... But I wonder if you've heard that there are also commandments meant to ensure a happy marriage? There are... really. Here are a few marriage commandments for husbands and wives: Number 1. Stop fiddling with the thermostat. Number 2. Don't hog the blanket. 3. Watch less football. Number 4. This is for men: Think twice before complimenting your wife's best friend on her new hairstyle. If you want to hear more of the marriage commandments – you'll have to come to one of my marriage workshops...

At any rate – the idea of Commandments that tell us things we are NOT to do is what many of us think about when it comes to sin. This is also the way that many think that the Church speaks to them... Don't do this... don't do that... A lot of that Commandment type thinking and teaching came from early Scripture... from early theology. It was the way that earliest – although inspired Scripture writers spelled out how to live in harmony with God and neighbor.

When Jesus came to earth, he wanted us to keep the commandments but also to come to a different vision of the Father. The vision that Jesus gave is found in the beautiful story of the Prodigal Son. You may have seen the reproductions of the painting called the Return of the Prodigal Son by Rembrandt.

My first chance to look at a large rendition of this was back in the Archdiocesan Offices in Denver. The Rembrandt original is in Russia and it was done on a massive scale – almost 8 ft by 12 ft.

The parable of the Prodigal Son – it is a beautiful allegory for God and our relationship with Him. And when we reflect honestly, we see ourselves as the Prodigal sons and daughters... Remember the son who demanded his share of the inheritance even before the Father was deceased? That's us. Give me my freedom Father – it's my choice. let me do what I want.

The Prodigal son goes off and squanders everything. And then he returns home. Listen while I read these words from that story: “The father saw the son while he was a long way off, and the father was moved with pity.... The father ran to him and clasped him... hugged him and kissed him. The father said to his servants: “Quick, bring out the best robe, and put it on him... put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast... because this son of mine was dead, and has come back to life. He was lost and now is found. And they began to celebrate.”

In his wonderful book on the Return of the Prodigal Son, Henri J. M. Nouwen tells of going to Russia and studying the original.

He then wrote his book after days and days of looking at – pondering – studying the Rembrandt original painting. There are many things we learn from Nouwen, For example, in the painting we don't see the face of the returning prodigal son. His back is to the viewer and the son is on his knees before his father. We do see the face of the father... and remember this one point – the hands of the father are on the shoulder of the son. This painting is so much more than the story of one repentant son... or his jealous brother. The story behind the parable is to tell us about the Father.

In the biblical story, we learn of the Father's tenderness and love and mercy. In the painting, sin and forgiveness embrace... We see the Divine Love that existed from the beginning ... and always will. The human and the divine become one. This is also a teaching about Catholic Sacraments – sacraments are the place where the Divinity and humanity come together.

If you have a book or a holy card and can find the image, look closely at the father; he is shown as old and nearly blind. Why would Rembrandt do this to an image representing God? Perhaps this is done to show that the Father doesn't see our failings and mistakes. The eternal love of the Father transcends our failures. The father sees with the inner eye of the heart.

Also in the painting – did you know that the hands of the father are different?

One hand is strong and virile – it is the hand of a man. The other hand is delicate and slender... it is a woman's hand. In his genius – Rembrandt shows us that the Father can be seen as both father and mother. How many mothers have not had to come to forgiveness of their children? Scripture tells us – Can a woman forget her child at her breast?

Well, after hearing these wonderful words and images about this bible story, we may have the tendency of the world to say 'Oh, about my sin... it's just me – the way that I am. God understands.' What the Prodigal Son story also teaches us is that there is a risk in such a one-sided view of the Father.

The Creator wants us to be free... free to experience love and freedom. This includes the freedom to leave home. And sadly, the freedom to go to a distant place and lose everything... perhaps never to return. However, the Prodigal story confirms that Father God wants us to come home to him... If we have left Him... if we are in sin... if we are squandering our time or our money or our freedoms from the Father...

Brothers and sisters: God is rich in mercy because of His great love. Let us follow in the path of the Prodigal Son... What do I mean? Well – in the story – the son had to first acknowledge he had sinned against his father.

Then he had to turn back and start the return to home. In honesty and humility – we need to agree that we all are prodigals. Can you do that? That’s the first step isn’t it?

We will have a parish Penance Service on April 2nd to be exact. There will be more information published about that soon. However, many sitting here among us resist or dismiss the sacrament of reconciliation – the return to a grace-filled relationship with the Father. They resist entry through that door – the door of the Confessional. Sin has damaged their understanding of the Sacraments and of Confession.

This Thursday and the following Thursday, we will have a gentle, frank but loving look at Confession. We’ll have two nights of discussion and short videos and some reading to help us look-again at Reconciliation. Now here is a quote from Sister Faustina – the nun who helped the Church learn of and to practice the devotion to the Divine Mercy of Jesus. Sister said, “A soul does not benefit from the sacrament of confession if it is not humble. Pride keeps it in darkness. The soul neither knows how, nor is it willing to probe the depths of its own misery. It puts on a mask and avoids everything that might bring it recovery.” This Thursday at 6:30 – after a welcome and an opening prayer – I will begin our workshop on Confession by telling you my personal problems with going to Confession. I will also tell you why I still try to go to Confession regularly. Will you join me? Blessings.