



His Excellency,  
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Diocese of Belleville

Sermon:  
Fourth Sunday in Lent,  
March 27, 2022,  
St. Teresa Parish, Belleville

(This is the text as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene*: This text has not been thoroughly proofread. Therefore, there may be errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation.)

### **“The Forgiving Father”**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Some years ago, after I hosted a group of priests for lunch at my residence, I received an angry letter from a woman condemning me for wasting the money of the diocese buying original Rembrandt paintings. Obviously, I do not own any such paintings. However, during the luncheons with our priests, I usually point out a \$25 print of Rembrandt’s famous painting of “The Prodigal Son,” which hangs in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. I call their attention to the hands of the father on the back of his repentant son and explained that Rembrandt used the hand of his father and mother as models to show that God has the qualities of Father and mother. Unfortunately, one of the priests gave his parishioners the impression that this inexpensive print was the original!

Jesus of Nazareth never told a parable called “The Prodigal Son.” Jesus simply told stories constructed to have different meanings for different listeners, in different times and in

different places. The gospel writers called them “parables” and later organizers of the gospels created chapter headings and titles for the stories to make the text easier to follow. Today’s story, “A man had two sons,” could just as easily be called “the forgiving Father” or “the frustrated faithful son.” The word prodigal means “one who spends money wastefully.” But the word can also mean “generosity and giving on a lavish scale,” the way the father gives his love to his selfish son.

In Luke 15, Jesus is talking to the scribes and Pharisees, the representatives of the Jewish religious authority who decided what behavior was right or wrong, according to Jewish law. The scribes and the Pharisees are watching Jesus. They are not happy about what they see. Jesus is surrounded by “tax collectors and sinners.” Jewish Tax collectors were despised because they worked for the conquering Roman empire. Luke says, “The Pharisees murmured, ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them.’” Then, after telling them the story of “The Lost Sheep” and “The Lost Coin,” Jesus tells them a story that could be called “The Lost Son,” the younger son who wasted his father’s money on loose and riotous living in a far away country. He is the perfect example of the proverb “A fool and his money are soon parted.” Keep in mind that in Jewish culture inheritance was only received after the father’s death. By demanding that his father give him his inheritance right now, the younger son may as well be saying, “Father, I wish you were dead!”

The younger son ends up feeding pigs. We may think of this as only menial, dirty work. But to the scribes and Pharisees listening to Jesus, feeding pigs was as low as you could sink. Pork was forbidden meat—pigs were regarded as ritually unclean animals. The younger son was so desperate that he wanted to eat the husks that he fed to the pigs, but he was not allowed to do so.

Thinking of how well-fed the servants are back at his father’s house, he decides to return with a speech planned to persuade his father to accept him: “Father, I have sinned against God and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your servants.”

What he didn’t know, of course, was that his loving father had been waiting for him. Every day he had been going out to look down the road hoping against hope that he would see his son coming home. When his father sees him, he dashes down the road, grabs him—ragged clothes and pig smells and all—and kisses him as if he’d returned from the dead, which, in a way, he had. Before the son could finish his speech, his father was shouting orders to the servants: get some decent clothes for my foolish son, kill the fatted calf, plan a feast.

Put the finest robe on him, the robe that befits the father’s house. Put a ring on his finger, the sign of Father-Son relationship. This is still my son! Put sandals on his feet. Servants were not permitted to wear sandals. The sign of slavery was bare feet.

The welcome home party could have been a good ending to a heartwarming story about a father's love for a wayward son. The scribes and Pharisees would have gotten the point: God loves all of His children, even those who sin and squander his gifts... He yearns for them, anxious to greet them with abundant love, a story of amazing grace.

But Jesus continued: "Now the elder son was in the field." He hears the music for his younger brother's party. He could have said, "Isn't this great! I'm so happy that my brother has come to his senses and returned home." Is that what you would have said? Is that what I would have said? I'm not so sure. The older son, thinking this is unfair, refuses to go into the party and the father has to go outside looking for him. "Father, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! But this son of yours (notice, not "my brother!") squandered your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you slaughtered the fatted calf for him!"

With whom do you identify? The foolish irresponsible son? The loving, forgiving father? Or the angry older son? "What about me, Oh God, what about me?" The scribes and Pharisees might have asked would God be this unfair?

The older son resents all the attention his brother is getting. In his anger, he adds some steamy details to the story. He says his brother spent all the father's money on prostitutes, even though Jesus does not say the younger son did this. Does the older son feel unloved by his father? Why didn't he have parties for him?

But his father says, "My son, you are 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."

This ending of the story is quite ambiguous. Jesus does not say if the older son went into the feast or not. Do you think he did? Or did not? Why would he? Why would he not? Would you go into the feast in a similar circumstance? Would I? Would we be confused by the father's generosity? Perhaps in your own family, you have experienced husbands or wives, fathers or mothers, sons or daughters who have wandered off and violated the bonds of love and later repented, returning home seeking forgiveness, hoping to be welcomed with a loving embrace? Some families are capable of such forgiving love, others are not.

The power of this story is the fact that each one of us may feel like all the characters in it at some point in our lives—we are, the one loving abundantly, the one being loved even when we are unlovable, or the one feeling that he or she has not has not been loved enough.

There is a sense in which Jesus Himself can be seen as the prodigal son of God the Father. One definition of the word *prodigal* is “profuse in giving, exceedingly abundant and generous.” Like the father in the story, Jesus reveals the universal love of God for us all, even the undeserving sinner. This story is a revelation of God’s amazing grace. The so-called parable of the prodigal son is a reminder that in the eyes of God, as revealed in last Sunday’s reading from Exodus as “I AM WHO AM.” “I AM THAT I AM.” Everyone one of us is lost in some way and, in God’s eyes, deserves to be found.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ: If we believe that to God everyone deserves to be found, perhaps those who have fallen away from Sunday Mass during the Covid-19 pandemic will be found and come home for Easter. Those who haven’t been to the Sacrament of Reconciliation for years will be found and go to confession in preparation for Easter. Those who have ignored the Church’s call to fasting, almsgiving, praying for catechumens, and for the conversion of hearts will be found and do so during these final weeks of Lent. Those who are always too busy to participate in Holy Week liturgies may also be found and resolved to do so this year. Those who have not prayed, even once, for the end to the diabolic horror in Ukraine will do so every day until it ends.

And, IF we believe that EVERYONE deserves to be found by God, we will even pray for President Vladimir Putin of Russia that some how some way he will be found and make his way to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, gaze upon Rembrandt’s exquisite painting of “The Prodigal Son” and be moved to put down his blood stained sword forever!

As you may know, Mariupol, the city that has been utterly destroyed by Mr. Putin’s evil and unjust war, was given its name by the Ukrainian Orthodox Christians, to honor Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Some of the residences prayed in her name that the innocent might be spared, but they were not.

Now with the Bishop of Rome, His Holiness, Pope Francis we pray from his prayer for peace:

“O Mother, hear our prayer.

Star of the Sea, do not let us be shipwrecked in the tempest of war.

Ark of the New Covenant, inspire projects and paths of reconciliation. Queen of Heaven, restore God’s peace to the world. Eliminate hatred and the thirst for revenge, and teach us forgiveness. Free us from war, protect our world from the menace of nuclear weapons. Queen of the Human Family, show people the path of fraternity.”

Our Lady Queen of Peace, guide us to peace in Ukraine and in our world.

Praise be Jesus Christ. Both now and forever. AMEN.