

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's Gospel was about the Prodigal Son. This parable, which St. Luke conveys to us, is part of Jesus's response to the Pharisees.

If we would go back a little in St. Luke's Gospel we would read that the tax collectors and the sinners were drawing near to hear Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes were complaining saying "This man receives sinners and eats with them." They didn't think the Jesus should be associating with sinners. They themselves would have nothing to do with sinners in order to make sure that they would remain clean.

The first parable that Jesus told in response to their complaining, was about a man who had 100 sheep, but one had gotten lost. He searched everywhere for that lost sheep and when he found it rejoiced and called his friends together to celebrate with him. Showing, that God rejoiced when even one sinner returned to Him.

Then he told a parable about a woman who had 10 silver coins and lost one. she searched her house until she found the coin. When she found it she caught her friends together to rejoice with her again just like God rejoices when one sinner repents.

Then St. Luke tells us the parable that we heard this morning about the Prodigal Son. What is a prodigal? A prodigal means someone who is wasteful, who is wasting his money, wasting his goods, wasting his very life.

There are three main characters in the parable. The first is the father. It is commonly agreed that Jesus means this man to be God the Father. He is loving and caring for His sons. Then we have the two sons. For some reason the younger son went to his father and asked him to give him his inheritance. What was going on in the younger son's mind we do not know. Perhaps he felt that his father was too hard on him and he wanted to go out on his own. Perhaps he had learned of the "pleasures" that were in the world away from his family.

The father, without fighting with his son, agreed to give him his inheritance. Then the younger son took his share of the inheritance and went to a far distance land. There he started spending his money without thinking. If he had been wise he would have invested the money so that he could make more money, instead he spent it on loose living. Doing all the things that he had been forbidden to do when he was at home.

One day a drought hit the land and the price of everything skyrocketed. He quickly spent all his money and was left without anything. He was on the verge of starving to death. He found one of the landowners who was willing to hire him to feed his pigs. Now this would have been highly offensive to a Jew since they were not allowed to even touch pigs, let alone eat them. But in his need he agreed to take the job. But for some reason this did not solve his problem of not having enough food. Whether the landlord was not paying him his wages or perhaps the wages were so low that he could not even afford to buy food he was still starving.

Finally, he came to his senses and realized that his father had more than enough food for his slaves. He said to himself, "I will arise and go to my father and will say to him father, I sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your paid servants".

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still at a distance, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. He ran, and embraced his son, and kissed him. Then the son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you! I am no longer worthy to be called your son." The father's household slaves followed him down the road. They must've been very surprised to see this old man running, for it was not dignified.

Now the father did not let his son finish saying the speech that he had planned on saying. The father immediately turned to his slave and said "bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet! The father was dressing him as his beloved son. The ring was a signet which indicated he had authority, the shoes on his feet also showed that he was a man of authority since slaves did not wear shoes. Then the father said "bring the fatted calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this, my son, was dead, and he is alive again! He was lost and now he is found!

The fatted calf normally was only killed during feasts and great celebrations. The father was so happy to see his son return from what he referred to as the dead that all he could do was rejoice. It was time to celebrate.

The workday had come to an end and the eldest son returned from the fields having worked the crops. As he approached the house he heard music and the sounds of the celebration. He thought to himself what could this be, there are no feasts at this time. Do we have guests? So he found one of the slaves and asked him what was going on. The slave told him that his brother had returned! Your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and healthy. This angered the eldest son. Instead of going in and joining the celebration he stayed outside fuming. The father came out and begged him to come in and join the celebration, but he refused to. He is angry because his father had welcomed his brother back home. He felt that his father should reject his brother since his brother taken his father's money and wasted it. His brother had spent all this time partying and when his luck had run out he had decided to return home. What sort of an example was this? How could you welcome such a sinner back into his household? He also expressed his jealousy over his younger brother since his father had never even given him a goat to have a party with his friends. The father responded to him saying: "Son you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours! But it was fitting to celebrate and rejoice, for your brother was dead, and is alive again. He was lost and is found!"

The Pharisees were probably infuriated at hearing this parable - if they understood it. They would have realized that the father was God. They should also have seen that the younger son were the sinners and tax collectors who lived unholy lives. Then they also would have seen that the eldest son was themselves. The Pharisees, as part of rejecting Jesus as the Messiah, also rejected those

whom he was bringing back to God. These men and women, who had been behaving like the prodigal son, now had turned back and had repented of their sins. The Pharisees should have been rejoicing, for those who were dead had turned back to God and repented.

Several years ago, when Metropolitan Philip opened the doors of the Church to non-Orthodox to become Orthodox, there was much dissension. The Greek Archdiocese had rejected those who were wanting to come into the church. Many of the people of our own Archdiocese also were not happy with Metropolitan Philip for allowing these people into the Church. But he welcomed them home, just as the father in this story of the Prodigal Son welcomed home his son who was lost.

I thank God for this wonderful parish that we have. I've never heard of anyone resenting the new members of our parish. In fact, we rejoice in it. It is all of our jobs to welcome everyone into our parish. We are also to go out into the world and share the love that God has for us and for all people. In the sharing of God's love, many will come seeking what we have found. They will knock and we are to open the doors of our parish to them. We are to help those who do not know God and to help those who may know God but are living sinful lives, to find the love of God. We are not to allow ourselves to be engulfed into the sinfulness that many of these people may have been living. We are to help them repent and ask God for forgiveness of their sins. Just as we too sin, we must not allow ourselves to become lost by thinking that it is okay for us to sin saying "it is only a small sin."

We read this parable every year three Sundays before the beginning of Great Lent. This parable is to remind us that we are not to judge others nor to condemn those who are lost. It is also to remind us that no matter how sinful our lives may have become; God will welcome us home if we repent. So the Lenten Season, as a season of repentance, is there for all of us to repent of our sins and to know as one of the Church Fathers said "The only mortal sin, the only sin on to death, is the sin that's not repented of." In fact, Jesus said that there's only one unforgivable sin – the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. He said we can blaspheme God, and we can blaspheme the Son of God, but if we blaspheme the Spirit then there's no hope for us. Why? Because the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit would mean that we don't repent—that we don't accept forgiveness. We don't accept mercy. We think that our sinfulness is greater than the mercy of God, which is the blasphemy. We are called to trust in the mercy of God and to admit our own sin. We have to admit the sin like the Publican in the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, who knew that he had done wrong and to admit it.

Repentance is often simply identified as a listing of sins and transgressions. As the act of pleading guilty to a crime. Confession and absolution are seen as being of a juridical nature. But something very essential is overlooked-without which neither confession nor absolution have any real meaning or power. This something is precisely the feeling of alienation from God, from the joy of communion with him, from the real life created and given to us by God.

It is easy for a one to confess that I have not fasted on prescribed days or missed my prayers or become angry. It is quite a different thing, however, to realize suddenly that I have defiled and

lost my spiritual beauty, that I am far away from a real home, my real life, that something precious and pure and beautiful has been hopelessly broken in the very texture of my existence. Yet this, and only this, is repentance, and therefore it is also a deep desire to return, to go back, to recover that lost home.

We received from God wonderful riches: first of all, life and the possibility to enjoy it, fill it with meaning, love, knowledge; then-in baptism-the gift of Christ himself, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the peace and joy of the eternal kingdom. We received the knowledge of God, and in him the knowledge of everything else and the power to be the son of God. All this we have lost, all this we are losing all the time, not only in particular sins and transgressions, but the sin of all sins: the deviation of my love from God, preferring the far country to the beautiful home of the father. Through sin we have lost the close relationship with God we were created to enjoy as his sons and daughters. We've gone our own way, which has led us far from God, and our lives are impoverished. But we can return. Once we recognize the wretched state that we are in, and long for something better, we have begun the journey home.

God, like the father in the story, is looking out for us, longing for our return. When he sees us in the distance he runs to meet us, arms outstretched to welcome us back, with new clothes laid out for us and a party ready. The arms are those of God in Christ, stretched out for us on the cross: the party is eternal life in the resurrection. But in this parable of the prodigal son, we see more than repentance: it speaks of compunction. Repentance is personal and for specific sins. Compunction goes much further than repentance. It is a more general mourning or sadness for salvation lost, by oneself and by others. While repentance does not necessarily involve the emotions, compunction is a feeling, which expresses itself in tears. Tears play an important part in the Christian life. They are a gift from God, and like baptism, wash away sins. St. John Chrysostom said that a single tear extinguishes a brazier of faults and washes away the venom of sin.

Compunction springs not only from a sense of salvation lost, but from fear of judgment. For though we may be forgiven after repenting of particular sins, we can never be sure that we shall not sin again; nor can we be certain of final victory over our faults. Yet we can be certain of unfailing love of God for us.

St. Luke's parable has been traditionally called the parable of the prodigal son: it could equally as well be called the parable of the Loving Father. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven if we repent of it; and at the first sign of repentance the love of God is there to welcome the sinner home.