

Lent 4

We have just been through the Oscars. Now we know what movies to see, the ones that won all the awards. “Precious” or “Crazy Heart” or “The Hurt Locker” might now be on our lists, especially once they are on DVD and we can rent them for half the price of a movie ticket.

I was thinking that if there were Oscars for the best parable, Luke might win hands down. In fact, if there were an Olympics for Parables, Luke would probably take both the gold and silver medals. Why? Because he has two parables which are everyone’s favorites and which belong to him alone. Neither Matthew nor Mark nor John (John doesn’t have any parables, does he?) have them. They are the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, our Gospel for today.

The first thing we should notice about this parable is its context. Jesus uses this parable to answer his critics who are scandalized by the fact that he welcomes sinners and even eats with them. To defend this scandalous behavior, Jesus gives his critics this story, this parable. And so what he is saying to them in and through this parable is this: I act this way because I believe that this is the way

God acts with all of us. God is a forgiving father. And since I represent the Father for you, I must act this way. Not to do so would be to give you a false understanding of what God is really like. And if you want to be God-like, then you, like me, ought to act in the same way. You ought to forgive those who have sinned. Like me, you should receive them and eat with them. That is the bottom-line, the meaning of this parable, and Jesus' purpose in telling it. He wants to teach his scandalized critics what God is like, for their understanding of God is wrong.

But once we get into the parable itself, there is so much more to learn about God and our relationship with Him. The story is so rich in its understanding of the human situation. The personalities of the father and his two sons are so well drawn, so right on target, so real. We say to ourselves: this is the story of the family next door, or, maybe even closer, this is, in whole or in part, the story of my own family. The father is the only beautiful personality in the story. His two sons, at least as far as I can see, are sad human specimens. For example, I am suspicious when it comes to the younger son's motives for returning. After all, he knows that his old man is a soft touch, and he might be playing that card. He rehearses the lines he will use as he plans his return: "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.” Is he sincere in saying these things, or is he simply looking out for numero uno once again? He cannot deny the awfulness of his present situation and the goodness of a possible restoration to his position as son in his father’s house. But is there also present in his heart a spark of true repentance, of sorrow at having hurt his father by what he has done? If there is just a spark of that, he is alright. If there is not, then he is a con-artist taking advantage of his father’s soft heart.

The elder son, it seems, is at least as selfish as his younger brother. He has no compassion for his brother and apparently no feelings for his father. He works hard, but why? Is it because it makes him feel and look good? It does not seem to be because he sees it as part of a loving relationship with father.

And so there is the father surrounded by his two boys, one a possible con-artist, the other apparently lacking in feeling for him. How the chips could have fallen so far from the good tree is a mystery, but it always is in human life, is it not? Parents who tried to do their best by the children wring their hands and ask themselves: “Where did we go wrong? What didn’t we do which we should have done, or what did we do which we should not have

done?” And there do not seem to be any clear answers to their questions. So they suffer, as this father suffers.

Our world is, as always, in the grip of sin. There is violence and hatred; there is poverty and massive injustice. We wonder what we can do about them. We realize that our personal problems are small compared with these larger social issues. And yet the two are not separable. There are these huge social problems because there are family problems, because ultimately the world is a collection of families. The brokenness of the world is a reflection of the brokenness of human families.

The only light in this darkness is the Father. In the parable the father surely knows that his younger son may be playing him, but he still loves him and will take him back and hope that his kindness will finally succeed in producing a change in his son's conniving heart. He also knows the coldness of his older son's heart, but he will not surrender to it. No, he will tell him once again that everything he has is his and that he too must accept his brother back as his brother. He will try once again to awaken a bit of love in his cold heart.

And so it is with God, Jesus is telling us. We cannot fool him. He knows what we are made of. He knows we will try to play Him. He knows that our hearts are frozen. But he will try once again to ignite a spark of love in us by showing once again that he truly loves us. All is forgiven. We must all join together as one family in a feast of love.

This is the God we believe in. This is the God who embraces us in our personal and family lives. This is the God we then present to the world in and through our own lives of love.