

24thSunday.07

1. Can we talk about God without talking about ourselves? Can we talk to another person without talking about ourselves? To a certain extent we can. When we are at our best and another person needs to talk, we can simply listen and say nothing about ourselves. It is hard to do, but we can do it. But when that happens, how should we name it? Is it a conversation? A conversation, it seems to me, presumes that two people are talking and exchanging something between themselves. Is that happening when only one person talks and the other listens? I will leave that to you to decide.

2. But this much is clear. When the Lord Jesus wanted to talk to us about his Father, he often talked about us, about our dealings with each other. That is what a parable is. It is a story about some human situation or relationship which we can then apply to our relationship with God. That is what we have in today's Gospel. Jesus' critics are complaining about the company he keeps: "This man welcomes sinner and eats with them." To answer their complaint, to explain why he welcomes sinners and eats with them, Jesus tells his critics three parables, three stories taken from human life.

3. His critics knew how shepherds behave. So Jesus tells them a story about a good shepherd who cares for every one of his sheep, even to the point that he will leave 99 sheep to find one lost one, and even to the point that he will call his friends together to rejoice with him when he finds that one lost sheep. Jesus' critics knew about losing a coin and searching for it. So he tells them a story about a woman who lost one of the ten coins she had and how she turned her house upside down to find it, and when she did, she was so happy that she called her friends to celebrate with her. That is what God is like, Jesus tells his critics. He goes in search of one lost person and rejoices when he finds that person. And that is why I welcome sinners and eat with them. I want to act as my Father acts.

4. The third parable which Jesus gives us, that of the prodigal son, has this same message, but it is much fuller in its description of the human situation, and because it is, it can tell us more about God and his relationship with us and our relationship with him. It tells us about two very different sons and their relationship with their father. In doing so it describes two different relationships which we can have with God. The first son was unthinking, even cruel, in his relationship with his father. He demands his inheritance even before his father is dead. Then he leaves and doesn't return until

his situation has become desperate. He knows he can presume upon his father's love, even though he was cruel to him. And so he prepares his careful speech ("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") and heads home. And he was right. His father has been waiting for him, and as soon as he sees him, he runs out to meet him, kissing him and embracing him. Only then does the son get the chance to give his little speech, a speech totally unnecessary and totally wrong, for his father has already received him back as his son, not as a hired worker.

5. The other son, the older of the two, is a very different person. He has never left home but his relationship with his father is strained. There is no joy in it. He has always been jealous of his careless younger brother and of his father's love for him. He is unwilling to forgive his brother's cruelty to their father and paints it as badly as he can (he swallowed up your property with prostitutes, he tells his father) and refuses to join the party the father is giving to welcome back his younger son. And he throws in his father's face his years of labor for him which were never recognized or rewarded.

6. The father must have been shocked by his elder son's feelings. Maybe he never noticed how this son felt. But now he tells him that everything he has is his, that they have always been together. But he also points out to him that he has to celebrate his other son's return.

7. The father in this parable reaches out to both sons. His love for both never wavers, and that is why he cannot allow his older son's lack of love for his brother to stand in the way of his love for his younger son. And that is Jesus' answer to his critics. Your fidelity to the law will not prevent me from reaching out to those who have not been faithful. I must eat with sinners and welcome them because that is how God acts with those who have failed him.

8. This last Lent a Fr. Harry Cain and a Ms Ginny ? preached a mission here, and their message was a simple one: God loves you. But some of you seemed to think that this was the first time you had heard this message, and you contrasted it with the hell and brimstone message of the missions of your youth. If that is true, that is sad. But, thank God, it is not too late for all of us to read these three parables again in order to grasp their message, one which is truly good news. For they all tell us the same thing: God is always watching us. And when we go astray, his is out on the

road looking for us, and when he finds us he kisses us and embraces us and gives a big party to celebrate our homecoming. That is good news indeed. Let us remind ourselves of it every moment of every day. Let us remind ourselves of it when we are tempted to look down on those whom we consider to be less faithful than we are.