

In the past couple of years as I have listened to confessions, especially during Lent, a common struggle is consistently confessed, anger or frustration. This frustration is often not directed toward a specific situation, but rather is directed towards large elements of society. Political, racial, and moral fragmentation leads to a general sense of unwellness. It is easy to become suspicious of motives or suspecting the worst in people you dislike.

Unfortunately, I even find myself falling into the temptation of *Schadenfreude*, the classic German word which describes taking pleasure in the misfortunes of others. When someone you dislike is brought to justice – when you think they will receive what is their due – it is easy to get carried away and forgetting what mercy is. For example, during this time of scandal in the Church, I have gotten caught up in seeing people I dislike having their reputations destroyed. Instead of desiring only justice or showing mercy, I also desire some revenge. This is to my discredit.

Lent is the time for us to face our own failings – to be purified in order to rejoice in the glory of the resurrection freed from the burden of enacting *my* vision of how things should be and *my* justice in bringing peace and order to the world. We are to be free to love justice and to give mercy.

In the first reading the Israelites have wandered forty years in the desert to purify them. They rejected the plan for freedom God had for them and rebelled against Moses. As a result, they stayed in the desert until they were ready to receive something better than their plan for the world and themselves. Finally, in today's reading, they are with joy leaving the desert. They no longer have to eat the tasteless food that they collect from the ground every morning. They eat fresh produce as they celebrate Passover. They have come home. Here is the first hint of the joy, the lightness, of this fourth Sunday in Lent – God, when we follow where we are lead, will free us and bring us home.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the longest and most expressive parables Jesus tells us in the Gospels. At the beginning of the reading, we hear the audience for the parable – the pharisees. The pharisees are serious about their faith, serious about following the law, and they are serious in teaching others how to act. Unfortunately, it seems, they may have exercised their own form of *Schadenfreude*. If someone led an immoral life, they would say that whatever misfortune comes to you is justice. There is not mercy but finger pointing. They look at Jesus with disgust because he welcomes sinners and tax collectors and eats with them. To them, Jesus addresses the parable. They would have understood themselves as the angry and unforgiving older brother.

What is it that the older brother is unable to do? He feels no joy. He has no pleasure in his brother's return. He may have been happy if he had heard of how his brother suffered after wasting his inheritance, but he was furious that his father loved his sinful brother and welcomed him home. In our lives sometimes we are the younger brother, but often we are the older brother. Rejoicing that another has been forgiven and given mercy can be one of the hardest challenges of the spiritual life.

Saint Paul in the second reading tells us that each of us has been reborn in Christ – we are a new creation. We are to leave behind the old self that counts the trespasses of others and judges the world through through distorted justice. We are now ambassadors for Christ. This full transformation takes place little bit by little bit. We all were once the prodigal son who received the father's mercy. We have probably spent some time as the older brother. In the end, according to Saint Paul, we are to begin to act like the loving father. People who give mercy and rejoice with their whole being.

The parable of the prodigal son is full of truth. However, in this world that we live in, our heavenly Father is not physically standing at the edge of the road looking for his son for him to embrace. Rather, we are entrusted with this majestic privilege. That is what Saint Paul means by calling us ambassadors. May this Lent and this encounter at the altar of the Lord bring us the joy of mercy that we may desire and look with eager expectation to show mercy and embrace the repentant.