

The *Other* Prodigal Son

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year C

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14
Psalms 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19

1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-32

We are all familiar with the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The title, however, is not a part of Scripture, but has been added by tradition. It does not begin saying “Jesus told the story of the Prodigal Son” but rather, “Jesus told them a parable.” Be that as it may, reading the story, in deference to the title, leaves me often wondering – which of the two sons is the Prodigal Son? As surprising as the question might be, it may not be so once one remembers that the story tells of two sons.

The story of the younger son who leaves and returns comprises a little more than half of the story. The other half tells of the older son who stayed, but was so resentful at the party for his wayward brother that he refuses to join the celebration. The story does not end on a positive note, but rather with the unresolved image of the father pleading with the older son to come in. For all we know the father is still pleading, and the older son is still refusing.

We relate the younger son to those sinners with whom Jesus associated – those he was seeking to draw back to the Father; those who were lost, whom Jesus was now finding; those for whom there will be a greater celebration on their return than over one hundred righteous

people. This younger son realized the hard way, that life was not about what he wanted to do, but about how blessed he was in living under the love and protection of this father. He returned with a gesture of humility and repentance, and was received back with great celebration. Those who have returned to the Church after “going astray” can relate to this part of the story, as can any of us who acknowledge our sinfulness and our need for the father’s love and forgiveness.

What about those of us who have never left, but have remained faithful? When we remember that the parable was addressed to the Pharisees, who resented Jesus’ fellowship with sinners, we more clearly see the Pharisees reflected in the older son. He did not leave. He remained faithful. In the end, however, it was all about him, not his fidelity to the father: “*I* have always been faithful,” “you never gave *me* a celebration,” “you never gave *me* something to celebrate with *my* friends,” “*I* refuse to come in.” Hence, his fidelity was in expectation of a reward for himself. This expectation and resentment, as much as his brother’s ambition and waywardness, led to alienation. We do not know, however, whether the older son



The Parable of the Prodigal Son

eventually comes in, or perhaps packs his bags and leaves the next day.

The story is about two sons. One son left while the other stayed. One returned in humility, the other refused to enter because of his pride. One came to appreciate the blessings he enjoyed with his father, the other expected reward for fidelity and services rendered. One son changed, the other did not. One learned that it was about his father's love; the other felt it was all about him. One son's story ends on a happy note; the other son's story does not. Which son is prodigal?

In the end we recognize both prodigal sons of this parable, but not as a third person, looking into the story from the outside. How do we relate to both types of "prodigalness"? How have we been lost, or strayed or departed, and sought to be found

so as to return to the father? On the other hand, how have we been "faithful", but also refused to be truly present, to live our faith completely, to participate fully in the worship life of the church?

As we hear this familiar story yet again, let us pray for those who have strayed from the faith, like the younger son. For those who, like the older son, have "remained faithful" let us pray that we all heed the father's call to live our faith more fully every day of our lives, and – more to the context of the story – participate more fully in our celebrations as a faith community, united with our Heavenly Father.

Fr. William Nicholas
September 14, 2007