

Sermon for the Third Sunday After Pentecost 2019

Dearly Beloved,

Today we mark the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, formerly the Sunday within the Octave of the Sacred Heart. The Gospel clearly relates to the feast which the Church celebrated two days ago, for Our Lord's parables tell us of His heart seeking us, his lost sheep and his lost coins. These parables come from the 15th chapter of Luke and culminate in the parable of the prodigal son, which, although it was not proclaimed today, I wish to comment upon since it has important details not found in today's parables.

Luke gives us the historical circumstances for all three parables as an introduction to the chapter, saying that "tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus; the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'" And so the Lord told them the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Thus they are parables for the self-righteous, for those who think of themselves as not needing the forgiveness of God, but also resenting when it is extended to those whom they view as sinners. In the parable of the prodigal son, the older brother is the self-righteous man who judges his brother, who complains when he is forgiven, and at the same time is ungrateful and takes God's gifts for granted, for even holiness is a gift from God.

But more important than the older son is the younger son and his father. You surely remember the parable, but just in case: the younger son asks his father for his share of the inheritance, even though his father is still alive; he then takes it and lives elsewhere, in a foreign country, and spends it all, living badly. When a famine breaks out, he finds a job feeding pigs and suddenly remembers that he would be better off at home and goes home to his father's estate. The father sees him from afar and runs to him, clothes him in fine things, and prepares a banquet for him, rejoicing that the one who was lost is found.

The merit of the younger son is twofold: first, he recognized the sorry state he was in, and second, that he would be better off humbling himself before his father than continuing to attempt to survive in a land of famine. This parable has a somewhat universal appeal: it is known to Christians and to non-Christians; it has been depicted in art and even has a catchy epithet: the prodigal son, much like the good Samaritan. But the parable has no meaning if we do not acknowledge its content: it is not a story about a man who feeds pigs and praises himself for that; it is about a man who sees that what he is doing is wrong and disgraceful, and that it would be better to be an abject in the house of God than to dwell in the tents of sinners.

The parable has meaning both for the man or woman whose life has changed from a state of sin to a state of grace, and for those of us blessed to be in a state of grace but still fighting against lesser habits of sin. For most of us, the first meaning has significance, for we have been freed from some habit of mortal sin, or some degree of grave ignorance, or from both, and that deliverance is a gift from God. Most of us can remember a time when we did not serve the Lord, when we were adrift, and then God came to us in grace and turned us to Himself and to His Church. Being mindful of this moment or moments can help us to have proper perspective: continuing gratitude towards Our Lord, and mercy towards others who live in sin or ignorance, just as we once did.

For those of us delivered from mortal sin and culpable ignorance but still fighting against the passions, there is the everyday return to God after we have fallen into sin, as even the just man does seven times a day: when anger gets the best of us; when we indulge in sensuality; when we give in to sadness; when we delight in our own excellence. Whenever one of the capital sins takes hold on our minds and hearts, we have begun to feed the swine; whenever we realize our folly and turn back to God, we have been saved again, to begin the journey back to our Father's house. Each moment of conversion is a gift of God; each turning from selfishness and pride is due to grace, and so even if our sins are what the world might call 'little sins,' we should realize that they are serious and deserving of punishment, and if we became hardened in them, we would merit hell. Pride

tells us that they are but little things; humility and gratitude tell us that if not for the grace of God, we would be wallowing in mud.

But even more important than the actions of the younger son is the love of the Father. We are likely to think of that love most manifest in running to meet the son as he approaches the villa. But in fact the love for the sinner began when he pricked his conscience amid the pigs and suggested to him that he return. Divine love is not like our love, which works principally by outward action: we do things for the ones we love; we say things to indicate our love, but we cannot act on the interior of the person except by them allowing an exterior action to affect them inwardly. God, on the other hand, can work interiorly without any exterior agent; He was the one who spoke in the son's heart to remind him of what he once had and could have again if only he would admit his sinfulness.

We have a tendency to think of divine action as following upon our decision to do the right thing; but in fact God is already active, moving our intellects to see the good and our wills to desire it. As the collect for the Mass says, there is *nihil validum, nihil sanctum* without God; nothing strong, nothing holy. God is the origin of our holy thoughts, holy desires and holy actions, and that is why the Saints can say in all honesty that whatever good there is in them is entirely due to divine action. No man turns from sin without God; no man grows in holiness without God. Thus the father not only runs to the son when he approaches the villa; he already ran to him in the pigpen, beckoning him to come home and stop destroying himself.

This should console us in our endeavors to bring about the conversion of sinners: the Lord can act where we cannot. We act exteriorly by witness or rebuke, by example or persuasion, but we so often fail. In our culture, we call mud what others call pure water; we condemn what they extol. We use reason to explain and argue; they use emotion and accusation. Yet the Sacred Heart of Jesus can still touch them interiorly; He can show them that it is mud and not water; that they are dying of hunger and that the only remedy is the Bread of Life, his flesh given for the life of the world.

We can help the Sacred Heart do its work in two ways: first, by accepting the grace of conversion day by day. Each time we turn from sin back to the living God, we build up the Body of Christ, for St. Paul says that what happens to one member happens to all. And so when we allow God to do good in us, we share the Lord's grace with all in the Church, and by extension, with all in the world; we become salt and light, which are so needed in today's world, for it has grown tasteless and dark. Even should we fall into mortal sin, we do good for the Church and the world by not wallowing in the evil that has overcome us, but by quickly confessing our sins, so that the King and His army will not have to fight the battle against evil with one less soldier.

The second way to help the Sacred Heart is to share in His pain of heart over sinners. In our society, it is easy to have animosity towards the enemies of the Church and of humanity, those who promote vice and try to conform us to their standards. It is easy to be angry towards those who insist on exhibiting their pride and disdain the need for a Savior. But in the mess that is Western society, Jesus is most in need of hearts that will weep with Him over the folly of the prodigal sons who prefer their pigpens to the Father's house. They have wasted their inheritance, but they speak as if they still have it. May we weep at this rather than get angry.

When Jesus said that at the end of the world charity will grow cold, He meant that many would no longer value the redemption He won for us, but He also meant that many of His faithful would be too comfortable to weep for sinners; they would be lulled into a stupor that would keep their hearts from truly feeling pain over the sheep lost in the wilderness. May we not be among those whose love grows cold, but let us entrust ourselves to the Sacred Heart, that contact with His heart might cause ours to burn with love. Though the month of the Sacred Heart ends today, let us continue to say the litany; let us continue to beg Him to make our hearts like His, so that we may serve as instruments to draw many souls to Christ, souls that are in need not of arguments or explanations, but in need of tears and sacrifices offered in secret. St. Paul says that the weakness of God is stronger than the strength of men; so also, our tears for the conversion of sinners are more powerful than the world's lies.

And then, in the world to come, we will be gathered together by the Blood of Our Savior, rejoicing to be rid of this passing world, safe in the Lord's fold, there to praise Him in the New Jerusalem, unto the ages of ages.