

The Prodigal Son

A Sermon by Fr. Orlando J. Addison, Vicar

Holy Faith Episcopal Church

Port St. Lucie, FL

March 10, 2013

Last Sunday I challenged you to produce fruit in a year from now and this challenge was based on the parable of the fig tree told by Jesus. The challenge is that if Holy Faith does not produce the kind of spiritual and numerical fruit the Lord is seeking from this community, then the congregation will cease to exist. There will be no more Holy Faith at 6990 S. Federal Highway and no one in the community will miss it because it did nothing --- or very little--- to bring Christ to the neighborhood, and to bring the neighborhood to Christ. This is a serious challenge that Jesus has placed before us and it will take all of us, not just the Vicar, to help Holy faith produce the fruits Jesus desires to find when He weighs this congregation in the balance, a year from now.

During last week's sermon on this topic I shared four basic steps to help us produce the fruits Jesus will be looking for:

1. Surrendering our lives, our wills, ambitions and identity to Christ. Only by surrendering these areas will we be able to produce fruit for Jesus. James says in James 4:10 "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will exalt you. In Matthew 26:39 Jesus surrenders his life to God the Father and invites us to do the same when He said "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." And Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians 2:5-8 "²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in

you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.”

When we surrender everything we have, everything we are to Christ Jesus, we allow God to take total control of our lives, our will, ambitions and identity, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, to live within His will for our lives. This is what surrendering means.

2. The second step was sharing. This means to share our stories, to share Jesus, to share our lives. When we begin to share Jesus with others, the Lord will see that Holy Faith is producing fruit for his kingdom. We will see people from all cultural backgrounds and languages worshipping Christ under this roof.
3. The third step was celebrating which means that we celebrate the joy of Christ in our hearts and His presence here among us in the Eucharist. When we begin to celebrate the God we claim to love, our worship will be a celebration.
4. The last step I shared with you that would help us produce fruit that Jesus requires of us, is the ministry of serving. When we learn to surrender, to share our stories, to share Jesus with others, and when we learn to celebrate Christ in the midst of us then sharing our time, talent and treasure will not be difficult, because we will be glad to share with Jesus and

with others what lawfully belongs to the Lord.

Now, today's Gospel from Luke introduces a new parable - one that is familiar to many, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This story brought a new perspective to me, a few years ago when I lived the agony, hopelessness and sorrow of a father who had to let his teenage son leave the house in order to pursue what he perceived to be freedom beyond the confines of the Rectory. Because one of the steps to producing fruit in this congregation is sharing our stories, I will share my story and the story of my Son Steven who made the decision to run away, just a couple months before his high school graduation.

Illustration:

The Sunday before I preached on the prodigal son, I did not want to preach on the story of the runaway son because I felt that it was a subject many preachers had already covered in many sermons; I wanted to preach on something different. So, I went to the Lord in prayer and asked Him to give me new insight into the story, I wanted to preach on the father's perspective rather than the son's. Consequently, I started to read about the subject, but I was unable to find enough helpful sermon material. Wednesday of that week came and I had nothing, Thursday and Friday came and still I had nothing.

On Saturday morning as I struggled to work on Sunday's sermon, my son Steven walked into my office and said to me that he was running away from home that day. At first, I did not know what to do or even what to say, because I was in shock.

New addition....

Even though I had known for some time that I was losing ground with Steven, and that he thought that I was way too strict a father, still I had hoped and prayed that he would come to know that I was strict with him because I loved him, and was trying my best to give him the life I did not have, and to equip him for a successful life as an adult.

Now this - he's running away! It was as though I had been struck a fatal blow, a knife pierced my heart. At that moment, I felt a million different emotions. I was hurt and dismayed, disillusioned and frustrated. I feared for what would become of him out there and at that moment I felt that I had lost all that I had worked for. All my dreams for my son vanished in a single moment.

Out of that place of darkness, I spoke: I said, "if this is what you want to do, then go ahead pack up your stuff and get out of the house." At this time I was very angry and totally exasperated. Then I walked with him to the rectory, helped him pack his stuff and, as he walked out the door, I said to him "once you leave, don't think of coming back," and he said to me, "don't worry dad I'm not planning to come back." At that point my heart shattered into a million pieces.

I returned to the office to continue working on the sermon, but I was unable to do so. This time it wasn't because I did not have the material, it was because I was too angry, too sad, too broken, to concentrate on it.

Sunday came and the only story I had was the story of a father who had lost his son the day before. It was not until that moment that I was able to understand the father's side of the parable of the prodigal son. As I shared my story with the congregation, I couldn't stop the tears from falling and everyone, men and women, cried with me that Sunday. When I finished sharing the story with a broken voice, and broken heart, I understood exactly what the father in the parable of the prodigal son felt when his younger son ran away, and it also became clear to me the pain, the agony and the broken heart God the Father experiences when we run away from Him to pursue our own desires.

The story of the prodigal son is about God's redemptive grace and mercy. It is a story of His unconditional love and forgiveness. It is about God seeking the lost.

In this story there are three important characters:

The younger son

The father

And the older son

The runaway son in this story represents people who run away from God and, after finding themselves lost in the world, they return to their Heavenly Father. We can also interpret the younger son's experience as members of the church who leave the congregation because they believe that they will find a better life away from God, away from the community and, after a while they return. Unfortunately some people wait until six people have to bring them to church in a casket.

The father in this story is God who remained at the door observing his son walk away from everything, and Jesus tells us in this parable that the father stood there waiting every day for his son to return. On the day when he saw his son from faraway, he was filled with compassion, ran and put his arms around him, and kissed him. Then the father did something unusual, he ordered his servants to bring out a robe, not an ordinary robe, but the best one, to put sandals on his feet, a ring on his finger and then instructed the servants to organize a party.

This is what God does when we return to him with broken and contrite hearts, when we repent of our sins and when we make a commitment to accept his son in our hearts. This is also what we are instructed to do in God's church, to organize a party to welcome anyone who walks through those doors to worship Christ with us. It is not our responsibility to judge the person, our instruction is not to make the person feel unwanted in this church, but open our arms to welcome him/her back to God's church.

Now the older son in the parable represents the Pharisees and the religious leaders who saw themselves as righteous people, living blameless lives, being obedient to God through obedience to the law, and as people who brought no disgrace to family or the community. The older brother showed no love to his younger brother; and he disagreed with his father for having a welcome

party for his runaway brother.

The older brother is much like us church people. Self-absorbed, petulant, more concerned with fairness and justice for ourselves than mercy and compassion towards others. Callused toward the lost -- they're not our concern. And angry, angry that we aren't in God's spotlight rather than the recently-converted unwashed. We are more concerned about us, rather than the strangers among us and the people outside these walls.

But to return to the story which I shared with you earlier --- this whole episode of Steven running away was taken to God in fervent prayer continuously and persistently by myself and by many of the faithful and God did send him back home not so long after he left. When he returned, I did not have a party to welcome him, first of all, I did not have the money to organize one and secondly, I was still angry with him. But today I can share with you that my son Steven and I have a very loving relationship where we hug each other and tell each other how much we love one another.

This should be our response to a brother or sister who has offended us, and who has repented from his/her offence. This should be our attitude toward people who come to Holy Faith seeking God's forgiveness and mercy. And this should be our motive for celebration as we come into our father's house.

Amen

Click [here](#) for this week's Collect and Lessons.