

Fourth Sunday of Lent
March 10, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Very often in Scripture heaven is commended to us as akin to a banquet or party. And today's Gospel is no different in this regard. We must understand the parable of the prodigal son as a prefiguration of heaven, wherein our reconciliation to God the Father will be celebrated by the heavenly hosts and the communion of saints. On this Laetare Sunday, the liturgy for which begins with the word "Rejoice," we celebrate with the angels and saints that such reconciliation has been made possible in the Blood of the Lamb; and, fittingly, we will go downstairs after Mass and enjoy a party of sorts, with coffee hour, followed by pot luck, followed by Little Flowers and Blue Knights.

This Scranton party here in Providence will be very different from the one Scranton witnessed yesterday. As is the case every year, my family and I went to bed to the sounds of sirens, while at the same time hearing the boisterous conversation of drunk people who sounded as if they were just outside our windows. Yesterday I looked, and they were. On a normal Saturday they would have been arrested for public drunkenness; but on Parade Day the resources of our police are stretched so thin that the thin blue line must concentrate on arresting the most egregious offenders. Non-violent drunks get a pass.

I contrast these two celebrations to point out that Jesus did the same thing in today's parable. In the first party, that of the younger son, who wasted his fortune on base living, the young man finds himself alone, literally living with pigs, with no friends and nothing to his name or in his pocket. In the second party, that occasioned by the reconciliation of the son to the father, the only person who is alone is the older son, the killjoy who refused to enjoy himself when his brother came back from death, but who also had never thought to celebrate life before that day, either.

Jesus here is teaching us that both forms of alienation are wrong. Both the alienation from partying too much and the alienation from not partying at all are destructive to the human spirit. Both forms of alienation are contrary to God's will for us. So where is the balance that incorporates celebration without the prudery of the older son or the self-indulgence of the younger?

To answer this question, we must first examine the lies that the sons believed. The younger son fell for what Christopher West has called counterfeit sacraments. The young man desires the inebriation that proceeds from the cup of the New Covenant, sealed in the Blood of the Lamb, but he settles for intoxication. He wanted Holy Communion, but took drunkenness instead. Also, he wanted the intimacy that proceeds from the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, and he settled for fornication with harlots. He wanted to grow closer to God through contact with the Lord's human vessels of grace, and he wound up alone because he chose to use others for his own gratification instead.

As for the older son, he forgot to be grateful, too. Rather than counting the bounty that his father had set before him and enjoying life once in a while, the older son spent his days counting the cost. He said that never once did the father give him a kid to celebrate with his friends, but we find it hard to imagine that he had any friends at all. He imagined that life was all about work and striving, that our Father is a task master who doesn't care if we're miserable; and in doing so, he forgot to ask for the banquet that his dad would gladly have provided, even hosted—if only he had asked. The younger son

got fooled by counterfeit sacraments, and the older one's poor disposition convinced him that there aren't any sacraments to be had. One fell for false love, and the other shut love out.

Herein then is the answer to the question I posed. Herein is the balance that we have to strike between the debauchery of parade day and the puritanism of the prudes and teetotalers. What characterizes genuine celebrations, parties that God blesses and wants us to have so that we know what heaven will be like, is love. Not love of the pleasures of the flesh, the self-indulgence marked by a complete lack of self-control, but love for God and for our neighbors the Lord has placed in our paths.

This love we find in the Bread of Heaven, our commemoration of our Lord's Passion, which culminates in our union with the Lord of heaven and earth. Thus, every celebration blessed by God is Eucharistic in character, facilitating not only union with God but with all those who ground their life in Him. Celebrations that are blessed by God are those that draw people closer to Him by fostering concord among His many children. Where damnable celebrations are scarred by love of self, blessed celebrations involve the self-offering of the host and the reciprocated sacrifice of the guest. This is joy within the sacramental economy.

Celebrations among prudes and teetotalers are impossible because they are suspicious of love. Specifically, they suspect that no one loves them, so they do not host banquets or go to them because such events may be occasions for rejection. The older son never asked for a kid because he was concerned his dad would say no. He had not heard, or had refused to hear, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you." Thus, he avoided contact with the very people who would have helped lighten his load, and his heart grew cold.

The failure of both sons was to love. One loved himself too much, and the other didn't love at all. We have a great witness to offer by demonstrating how to love in the right way. It begins by making our lives right with God, not by being perfect, but by being penitent for our imperfections. Such penitence will make us patient with those who are struggling in the same way, and we will be able then to offer ourselves, to love as we have been loved, not because we were perfect, but despite our imperfection. We won't be like the older son, so convinced of his own goodness that he can't bear to be with anyone else, and no one else wants to be with him.

When we celebrate in the right way, we offer aid and comfort to both camps. On the one hand, for the self-indulgent, we show that every party is supposed to be a celebration of love, with its focus on the eternal banquet we hope one day to enjoy in heaven, never on the fleeting pleasures of this world that are passing away. And on the other hand, for the prudes, we show that joy is something God genuinely wants for us, that it is possible, and we can drink of its fruits without compromising our virtue. Indeed, we'll show that if we don't rejoice for love of God and man, our souls will die, as certainly as debauchery destroys our bodies. And when we do have a party we'll show that celebrations are a sign of life, both now and in the age to come.