

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 15, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 15:1-32

I am often confronted in the confessional with the sin of ingratitude, a failure to recount for God the blessings He has bestowed upon us and then thank Him for them. This, however, is not usually what the penitents confess. They usually confess gluttony, or envy, or jealousy, or the dishonoring of parents, or anger, or infidelity. You see, ingratitude is the root of all these sins, because these sins can only be committed when we concern ourselves with what we do not have and forget what we already possess. That is, one cannot, for example, be simultaneously grateful and envious. We fall into envy precisely because we have allowed ourselves to forget the blessings all around us.

Both sons in the parable we just heard commit this sin of ingratitude. The first, whom we usually call the prodigal son, fell into gluttony and unchastity, to say nothing of dishonoring his parents, because he was not grateful for what he already had. He had a home, loving parents, a job, and the promise of a secure and bright future, but he concerned himself with the inheritance he had not yet received. So he demanded the money, then left behind all the blessings he had not recounted—his family, his friends, his future. After he had consumed his material wealth, he became acutely aware of what he had abandoned and he wanted it all back. His physical hunger, and his alienation from those around him, convinced him of how fortunate he had been, and at last he was grateful for what he had received as a young man.

We don't get to see if the older son ever comes around and becomes grateful. We only see his ingratitude. Like his brother, he has a roof over his head, clothes on his back, food in his stomach, a loving family, job security, and a bright and secure future. But rather than give thanks for these blessings, he hears the party being thrown for his brother and concerns himself with the kid that was never given so that he could have a party with his friends. He falls into envy as he becomes angry and bitter about the good things given to his brother simply because he allowed himself to forget the good things that had already been given to him.

It's easy to see, then, that whenever we commit this sin of ingratitude, we sin against the giver of all good gifts, our heavenly Father. Yes, we fail to show thankfulness to our parents, but the deeper, more foundational, sin is our failure to give thanks to God for our parents. We fail to thank the God with Whom they cooperated to give us life, even as we refuse to see that they are instruments of grace through whom we received untold blessings, both material and spiritual. Thus, in the parable of the prodigal son, the sons both represent fallen humanity in all its ingratitude for God's blessings, while the father represents our heavenly Father, Who continues to shower us with love and provide for all our needs, even as we sin against Him.

We see through this parable how sharply our desires contrast with God's. We chase after material wealth, indulging our appetites, and relationships, that are too often fleeting. God, on the other hand, desires our souls. The sheep that was lost, the coin that was lost, the prodigal son who was lost—each of these is one of God's children, and the rejoicing in each of the parables is the rejoicing in heaven that occurs when one of the lost turns from his sin and embraces life. God seeks us out, and when we finally allow ourselves to be found, His joy is more than we can imagine.

What distinguishes the younger son from the older is not the amount of love the Father has for each of them. He loves them both the same. But the younger son, having sunk so low that he would gladly eat pigs' food, fortunately develops a cognizance of sin. He says, "I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." He is able to return to the Father in gratitude because he sees that God loved him in spite of his sin. His Father did not love him because of what he did. His Father loved him for who he was. It is this unconditional love that we so often squander that makes us unworthy when we sin. Yet, as soon as we confess that unworthiness, God showers us with blessings and then invites us to partake of the marriage supper of the lamb.

This dynamic is present explicitly in the holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Not only do we say in the Prayer of Humble Access, "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table . . .," we say three times, "Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldst come under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." And what happens as soon as we say these words?! We find ourselves to be partakers of Jesus' Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We are united to God while at the same time being united to all those who have the same cognizance of sin and need for redemption. How do we receive our Lord worthily? By acknowledging our need for Him, while at the same time confessing our unworthiness to receive so precious a gift.

It is helpful to remember, finally, that the word "Eucharist," which we are celebrating right now, means "Thanksgiving." To come to Mass must contain within our purposes the intention to give thanks. We bring to the altar our needs, our desires, our sorrows, our hopes. But we must first bring to Jesus our thanks. Gratitude is an inoculation against sin. A grateful heart will cast out the selfishness that leads us to desire material wealth over the love of our Father, the selfishness that causes us to lament the party we never had before we will join the party for our brother, who stands broken before us.

When we regularly recount the blessings that we have received out of God's hands, our petty jealousies appear as silly and groundless as they are. God has withheld nothing from us. We may not have asked for what He wants to give, and we may well have squandered what He gave before we even recognized it was from Him. But God has not loved anybody more than He love us still. Sometimes, in order to recognize how much He loves us, we have to admit how we have failed to love Him. And when we do, we'll be able more fully to enjoy the party to which He invites every one of His children.