

Gratitude Foundation



*“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?
Has only this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”*

(Lk. 17:15-17)

The Fourth Sunday of Lent —Year C

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“In all things give thanks, it is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”

(1 Thess: 5:18)

Fourth Sunday of Lent - C

Reading I

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12

The LORD said to Joshua,
“Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you.”

While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho,
they celebrated the Passover
on the evening of the fourteenth of the month.
On the day after the Passover,
they ate of the produce of the land
in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain.
On that same day after the Passover,
on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased.
No longer was there manna for the Israelites,
who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7.

R. (9a) Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall be ever in my mouth.
Let my soul glory in the LORD;
the lowly will hear me and be glad.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Glorify the LORD with me,
let us together extol his name.

I sought the LORD, and he answered me
and delivered me from all my fears.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Look to him that you may be radiant with joy,
and your faces may not blush with shame.

When the poor one called out, the LORD heard,
and from all his distress he saved him.

R. Taste and see the goodness of the Lord.

Reading II

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Brothers and sisters:

Whoever is in Christ is a new creation:

the old things have passed away;

behold, new things have come.

And all this is from God,

who has reconciled us to himself through Christ

and given us the ministry of reconciliation,

namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ,

not counting their trespasses against them

and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.

So we are ambassadors for Christ,

as if God were appealing through us.

We implore you on behalf of Christ,

be reconciled to God.

For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin,

so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

Verse before the Gospel

Luke 15:18

I will get up and go to my Father and shall say to him:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

Gospel

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying,

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So to them Jesus addressed this parable:

“A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father,

‘Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’

So the father divided the property between them.

After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings

and set off to a distant country

where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation.

When he had freely spent everything,

a severe famine struck that country,

and he found himself in dire need.

So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens

who sent him to his farm to tend the swine.

And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed,

but nobody gave him any.

Coming to his senses he thought,

‘How many of my father’s hired workers

have more than enough food to eat,

Gospel (Continued)

but here am I, dying from hunger.
I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him,
“Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.
I no longer deserve to be called your son;
treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.””
So he got up and went back to his father.
While he was still a long way off,
his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion.
He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him.
His son said to him,
‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you;
I no longer deserve to be called your son.’
But his father ordered his servants,
‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him;
put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.
Take the fattened calf and slaughter it.
Then let us celebrate with a feast,
because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again;
he was lost, and has been found.’
Then the celebration began.
Now the older son had been out in the field
and, on his way back, as he neared the house,
he heard the sound of music and dancing.
He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean.
The servant said to him,
‘Your brother has returned
and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf
because he has him back safe and sound.’
He became angry,
and when he refused to enter the house,
his father came out and pleaded with him.
He said to his father in reply,
‘Look, all these years I served you
and not once did I disobey your orders;
yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends.
But when your son returns
who swallowed up your property with prostitutes,
for him you slaughter the fattened calf.’
He said to him,
‘My son, you are here with me always;
everything I have is yours.
But now we must celebrate and rejoice,
because your brother was dead and has come to life again;
he was lost and has been found.’”

Exegesis

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12

The *Book of Joshua* is principally concerned with the Israelite People led by Joshua who was Moses' successor. It covers a period in their history from about 1220 to 1200 B.C. It begins with the people encamped in the Trans-Jordan area at Shittim, just east of the Jordan River. The book begins as follows: "After Moses, the servant of the Lord, had died, the Lord said to Moses' aide Joshua, son of Nun: 'My servant Moses is dead. So, prepare to cross the Jordan here, with all the people, into the land I will give the Israelites.'"

Forty years have now passed since the Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea. Now the people are preparing to pass over the Jordan River into the Promised Land. The actions of Joshua are strikingly parallel to those of Moses. Just as Moses led the people through the Red Sea, Joshua will lead the people through the Jordan River on dry land. "The people struck their tents to cross the Jordan, with the priests carrying the ark of the covenant ahead of them. No sooner had these priestly bearers of the ark waded into the waters edge of the Jordan... than the waters flowing from upstream halted... While all of Israel crossed over on dry ground, the priests carrying the ark of the covenant remained motionless on dry ground in the bed of the Jordan until the whole nation had completed the passage." (Josh 3: 14-17).

This powerful act of God is preparing the way for the Israelites to enter the Promised Land. News of the event reached the ears of the Canaanite leaders. "When all the kings of the Amorites to the west of the Jordan and all the kings of the Canaanites by the sea heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the Israelites until they crossed over, they were disheartened and lost courage at their approach." (Josh 5:1).

The setting of our pericope is Gilgal about half distance between the Jordan River and Jericho just west of the Jordan River. The date is the eve of the 14th of the first month of the Hebrew calendar which was later named Nisan. The month began with the first full moon after the spring equinox, March or April on the Roman calendar. The winter rains are coming to an end and the grain and other crops that grew during this season are ready for harvest. For the first time the people will reap the crops of the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey. They apparently reap what they did now sow, and therefore must see it as total gift from God.

The people will celebrate Passover for the first time in forty years, since the original Passover. The wandering years are now over. The people have reached the Promised Land, albeit, on the southeastern corner, but they nonetheless have arrived. Those that remained faithful under the leadership of Moses, the remnant, have reached their destination safely. To mark this historical occasion the manna from Heaven ceases. The food for the journey is no longer needed, as they have arrived at the Promised Land.

Exegesis (Continued)

Psalm 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7.

Psalm 34 consists of twenty-three verses and is titled *Thanksgiving to God who Delivers the Just*. Psalm 34 is just one of many Psalms devoted to giving thanks and praise to God. Our Psalm today gives joyful thanks and praise to God for His saving hand.

I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall ever be in my mouth. The Hebrew word translated as *bless* is *brk* (pronounced bay-ruck). It can also mean *praise* or *kneel before* as in an act of worship. Certainly, God has no need of our blessing. The Hebrew word for *praise* here is *tehillah*. *Tehillah* is often translated as *praise, glory, or song of glory and praise*. Most often it refers to a song of praise.

I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. The Hebrew word for *fear* in this passage is *magorah*. *Magorah* describes a craven fear as in being horrified. This word contrasts the word *yaray* that is translated as *fear* when referring to our response to God. *Yaray* describes more of a sense of awe and reverence.

Look to him that you may be radiant with joy. This again is a call to outward expression of joy and gratitude. It is important that we taste and see, experience the goodness of God and that others may then see God's goodness shining in our faces. Not only is God's goodness to be heard in our songs of praise, but God's goodness is to be seen in our faces and actions.

When the poor one called out, the LORD heard, and from all his distress he saved him. Our God hears our pleas and seeks to save and deliver us from all distress. For this we respond with gratitude and praise.

Taste and see the goodness of the Lord. Verse 9a, the response, is very experiential. It speaks of experiencing the goodness of God in what we can see and taste. The Hebrew word for *taste* is *tahum*. It means to savor and perceive with the senses. The Hebrew word for *goodness* is *tob*. It carries connotations of beauty, pleasing to experience, and wellness.

Exegesis (Continued)

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

St. Paul founded the Christian community at Corinth during his second missionary journey about the year 51. Paul wrote his first letter to them from Ephesus in the year 56. Most scholars suggest that Paul wrote the first section of his second letter in the fall of that same year, 56. Scholars surmise that the second letter was two separate letters, the first consisting of chapters 1-9 and the second chapters 10-13.

Both sections of his second letter, much like the first, address a variety of issues that the fledgling Church was dealing with. *2 Corinthians* is considered the most personal and emotional of all of Paul's writings.

Our pericope is taken from a larger section that begins with verse eleven that it titled *The Ministry of Reconciliation*. Verse 11 begins: "Therefore, since we know the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others." The Greek word for *fear* is *phobos*. Whereas, this word can be used to connote craven fear, in relation to God (like the Hebrew word *yaray*) it more often means awe and reverence. In any event, St. Paul, is reminding the community that others have not come to this knowledge of God, and it is up to them to make God/Christ known.

All must come to know Christ in the Spirit. Verse 16 immediately precedes our selected passage today. "Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh; even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him so no longer." (2 Cor 5:16). Some false prophets were influencing the community with external shows of ecstasy which Paul believed were not of Christ or of the Spirit. Paul referred to those false teachers as "those who boast of external appearance rather than of the heart." (2 Cor 5: 12).

So, whoever is in Christ is a new creation. St. Paul spoke often about putting on the heart and mind of Christ. *New creation* was a common expression in the Jewish faith. It was used to describe someone who came into the faith. It was also used to describe those who experienced the forgiveness of sins on the day of atonement. As Christians we speak of the effects of baptism as dying to the old and rising out of the water as a new creation. Jesus assured Nicodemus that he must be born from above. The New Covenant thus begins a new order in history where creation is steadily renewed, beginning with our souls, and extending to every corner of the cosmos (Rom 8:19-25, Rev 21: 1-5).¹ Christ does not destroy the old order of creation but heals it, perfects it, and elevates it with supernatural life (CCC 1214, 1265).²

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Here is the heart of Paul's message. The Church began her mission at Pentecost. St. Peter summed up this mission at the end of his famous speech. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2: 38).

For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin. The Prophet Isaiah foretold of this truth in his suffering servant song. "Yet it was our infirmities that He bore, our sufferings that He endured... When He was cut off from the land of the living, and smitten for the sin of His people, a grave was assigned Him among the wicked and a burial place with evil-doers, though He had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood." (Is 53: 4, 8-9).

1. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible—The New Testament; Ignatius Press; S.F., CA; page 320.

2. Ibid.

Exegesis (Continued)

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The Parable that we have come to know as the *Prodigal Son* begins at the beginning of Chapter 15. “The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Him, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So, to them He addressed this parable.” (Lk 15: 1-3). Note that Jesus uses the word *parable* in the singular form. Then Jesus tells the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin and then the lost son. It is one parable with three distinct stories. In common there is something lost and then something found and there is joy and rejoicing when the lost is found. What differs is the way things are lost. The sheep without reason just wanders off lacking enough intelligence to be held accountable for his own actions. He just drifts away in search of greener pasture or water. The coin is lost through the fault of someone else. The lost son, on the other hand, makes the personal choice to leave the father’s love. The moral seems to be that no matter how someone or something is lost, it is the finding that is most important in the end.

Our focus today, however, is the famous story of the *Prodigal Son*. It is important to remember the audience that Jesus is addressing. He is addressing directly the scribes and Pharisees, but He is in the presence of tax collectors and sinners as well. Jesus is speaking directly to each one of us. The above would include all of humanity, as we are all sinners, and all of us have some scribe and Pharisee within us.

The parable of the *Prodigal Son* is unique to Luke’s Gospel. Luke, the physician, emphasizes the lost and found motif as an element of healing, i.e., salvation. Other examples would be the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost child in the temple, the lost son(s), the lost disciples on the road to Emmaus.

The first lesson is that love is free. The son is allowed to leave the father’s love, to cut himself off from the father’s love, to squander the father’s love.

The second lesson is metanoia. In contemplating this parable, many acknowledge the younger son experiencing a metanoia as he hits bottom in this distant country. We are told that he comes to his senses. Jesus shares with us the inner thought process of the younger son. He is starving and realizes that his father’s hired workers at least have enough to eat. He decides to get up and go back to his father. He has no expectation of his father taking him back as his son. This is an intellectual choice for survival. I don’t see it as a conversion experience. The moment of metanoia is when his father runs down the road to greet him, embraces him, puts on the ring and the robe and sandals. He is not even restoring him to sonship, he is acknowledging that he never ceased to be his son! Against all of the culturally accepted mores of the time, the patriarch of the family ran down the road and embraced his son in public. When the young son experiences love beyond all understanding is when metanoia happens.

The third lesson is that we can be in the presence of love and not be open to experience it. The older son never left the father’s love yet was not allowing himself to experience it. He too was lost in that his heart was not open. He was too closed in on himself. Whereas, the younger son represents the tax collectors and sinners, the older son represents the scribes and Pharisees. The older son and the scribes and Pharisees are lost in their own self-righteousness and self-serving love.

The most important lesson is the prodigal or extravagant love of the Father. This is who God is, Jesus tells us! Many believe that this story should be titled *The Prodigal Love of the Father*.

Reflection

This weekend we are blessed to read the beautiful and timeless parable that we call the *Prodigal Son*. I believe that the readings that the Church chose to support this Gospel draw us more deeply into the meaning of the parable. The readings call us to contemplate the arrival or the experience of God's love and mercy that is beyond expectation and above human understanding. Recall the words of Jesus to Peter: "You are still thinking as human beings think and not as God thinks." Not only are we able to know and think as God knows and thinks, but God desires and even expects us to come to this level of knowledge and being.

In our first reading this weekend, from the Book of Joshua, the Prophet talks about the experience of the Israelites as they arrive in the Promised Land. After a long and difficult journey, a remnant of the people experience the fulfillment of the great promise of God, a land flowing with milk and honey. In a similar way our Psalm calls us to "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord." In our second reading St. Paul tells us that those who arrive in Christ will become a new creation.

One of the great scenes in all Sacred Scripture is the arrival of the Prodigal Son into the arms of his loving father. I posed the question one time at a school Mass: "Why did the Prodigal Son leave his father in the first place?" A little girl looked at me and answered, "Because he could." As usual it was a better answer than I was looking for. Love must be free, or it would not be love. Because we are free, we often stray from God's love. The reality of our fallen human nature is that we are prone to stray. We are told that the Prodigal Son traveled to a distant country. The literal translation is "the big emptiness." When we stray or cut ourselves off from God, we experience emptiness. This is what St. Paul refers to as death and ultimately hell. In this fallen and empty state the Prodigal Son comes to his senses, gets up, and returns to his father. He is hungry and dying and decides to choose life. He has a story all rehearsed and has no expectation of coming back as his father's son. Jesus shares with us the young son's inner thoughts for a reason. The son expects only to come back as a hired hand. He has no hope or expectation of returning as his father's son.

Beyond all expectations, beyond all culturally accepted mores of the time, the father runs down the road and embraces his son. Arriving in the arms of his loving father the son must experience a love and a mercy beyond his ability to understand. To me this arrival is the moment of metanoia, i.e., the moment when love is experienced that is beyond the mind and reaches the level of the heart. This is who God is, Jesus tells us! Each one of us must come to experience this love for ourselves. Each one of us must come to this moment of "arrival" or as St. Paul says, "Become a new creation."

Yours in Jesus and Mother Mary,



Personal Witness

My entire life I had heard of God's love. I knew in an intellectual way that God loved me. I knew that He died on the Cross for my sins. I remember feeling the warmth of God's love as a child, but then for years God's love seemed absent in my life. I realize now that it was because I drifted from God. It was not an intentional act, like the Prodigal Son. It was more like the lost sheep who wandered away, with his own legs, but without a lot of forethought. Like the sheep I was wandering off looking for greener pastures and restful waters. I was lost.

Jesus, using the hands and feet, and the voice of a friend of mine, was seeking me out. He is the Good Shepherd who never stops searching for us. I can see now, what I could not see then. My friend dragged me, kicking and screaming, to a Cursillo weekend retreat. I heard that familiar story of the *Prodigal Son* at the beginning of the penance service on day two of the retreat. It was a story that I had heard many times. But this time it was different. The Father was talking to me each time He spoke. I was both sons. I was both the younger and the older son. I was lost, in that I had strayed from God. I was close like the older son, yet I was standing on the outside, refusing to enter God's love.

I had built a shield or a crust around my heart. I was not letting God or others in. In a moment of grace God melted my heart and I felt the embrace of His love for the first time in my life. I was not expecting that! I was feeling unlovable. God loved me anyway.

In the seminary I was drawn into the famous painting by Rembrandt titled *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Providentially a beautiful 5' x 7' print of the painting was hanging above the tabernacle in the blessed sacrament chapel in our residence hall. It was a place that I would spend many hours in contemplative prayer. At first, I saw myself as the unknown person in the middle of the painting just looking in. As I began to enter into the painting, I saw myself first in the place of the younger son, reminiscing of that moment of conversion during the retreat. I could feel repeatedly the embrace of the Father's love in real time. Each time was as real and powerful as the first.

Months later I began to see myself in the older son, standing near to God, yet distant in my own self-righteousness. I also repeatedly fell to my knees and beat my breast as the sinner kneeling before the Father. I soon realized that I was every character in the painting... except the Father.

As I received my first assignment as a priest, I hung in my confessional a beautiful print of *The Return of the Prodigal Son* that I had received as an ordination gift from my aunt. It was in hearing my first confession that I came full circle with the painting. As I raised my hands and prayed the prayer of absolution I looked up at the painting and realized that I was now the arms of the Father embracing the soul kneeling before me. How can a prodigal son become the arms of the Father's embrace? As Jesus once said, "With God all things are possible."

