SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON  
February 20

THE GOSPEL READING  
Luke 15:11-32  
[The Prodigal Son]

The Lord said this parable: “There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me.’ And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his belly with the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.’ And he arose and came to his father.

But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to make merry.
Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

THE SERMON

The parable of the Prodigal Son (in other words, the “wasteful son”) tells us about the love of God for us and how by repentance, we are saved from sin and received back into His Kingdom. The father in the story symbolizes our heavenly Father, and the son symbolizes each one of us. At the story’s beginning, the son asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive, which is highly unusual. In his selfishness, he wanted to take his share of the household so he could depart and use his inheritance for his immediate pleasure. His future inheritance would have been his father’s kingdom, but he preferred the present pleasures of life instead. Like Adam, he leaves paradise when he turns from his father and goes his own way, squandering his possessions on reckless living.

When the prodigal son had spent everything, there was a famine in the land, and he took a job feeding pigs. A very lowly job for a person who once stood to inherit a kingdom! By his choices, he demeaned himself. He was now living in the filth of a pigpen, for he had nothing else left. His choices had led him to degradation, poverty, loneliness, and despair. This was the result of turning from his father – who again symbolizes God – and embracing a life of sin.

The story comes to a turning point, however, when the son comes to his senses and realizes his lowly state. He “came to himself” and remembered that his father’s servants had plenty of food, but he was perishing with hunger among the pigs and the mud. The prodigal son, so to speak, hit “rock bottom” – and was thereby motivated to repentance or “metanoia” (μετάνοια in Greek), which means a turning around, a reorientation, and a new way of thinking.

Hitting rock bottom in our own lives happens when we realize we cannot go on in the way we are living. An immediate change is necessary so that we can begin our journey to recovery. The prodigal son said to himself, “I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy
to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’”

After that comes the necessary second step of repentance: the son does what he says. He gets up from the mud and starts the journey home. While he was still at a distance, his father saw him, and at first sight of his son, he was moved with compassion (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη in Greek). An earthly father would perhaps be conflicted to see the son who had betrayed and left him. However, because he represents our heavenly Father, Who is more merciful than any man, his immediate response is to be moved with compassion for his repentant son. As we read several times in the Scriptures, “The Lord is gracious and merciful, longsuffering and abundant in mercy” (see, for instance, Psalm 144:8).

His father, therefore, ran to him. It was usually considered undignified for an elder to run in that time and culture. Still, the father’s love for his son is such that he did not even wait for his son to come to him or even apologize. He runs to his son, embraces him, and kisses him. The son’s repentance is confirmed by his words, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight and am no longer worthy to be called your son.” His repentance was conceived in his heart and born in his actions. This is nothing short of a spiritual resurrection from the dead.

The son had run back to the father’s house, which symbolizes the Church. This reminds us that if we choose to stay out of the Church, we might have what looks like a full and happy life, but at some point, we might realize that our spiritual gifts and riches are decreasing. We will be missing the most important part of life, which is participation in the love of God. We always have the choice to turn back to our Father’s house, recognize our weakness, humble ourselves with repentance, and experience grace, joy, and love. The father receives the prodigal not as a servant but as a son, showering gifts on him. This is also our hope.

At the end of the story, we see the elder son embittered by his father’s grace towards his young brother. The elder son was out working in the field, and as he came home, he saw the feast that the father had given to his repentant son, and he was angry and refused to join. The elder son represents our own hearts when we are more concerned about the sins of others than our own faults. During Great Lent, we have the prayer of Saint Ephraim on our lips, and we ask, “Grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother.”

The jealousy of the self-righteous older son is a warning to all of us. As we strive to serve God and His Church with all we have, we might fall into the temptation of thinking that grace and salvation belong to us. We might think that we have earned it or are entitled to it. However, grace and salvation are given to us entirely by the love of our heavenly Father. We do not earn anything from God. With open hands and open hearts, we simply receive the gifts of God as His beloved children. When a “sinner,” a prodigal soul, finds their way back to the Church, may we show genuine love, compassion, and joy for that
soul. Let us rejoice that they are again members of Christ’s Body and have the same hope of salvation that we ourselves have. Let us rejoice when our sisters and brothers reunite with our Father in heaven since we are all God’s children. The father answered, “Your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.”

The parable of the Prodigal Son teaches us that sin is a kind of exile, enslavement, and poverty. Repentance is the return from exile to our true home, so that we can receive our true inheritance and freedom as members of our Father’s household. To repent is not just to feel dissatisfied or ashamed, but to act – to turn around. God will always welcome us. As Saint Athanasios says, “His father neither takes him in like a hired servant nor treats him like a stranger. Oh no, he kisses him as a son. He accepts him as a dead man come back to life again. He counts him worthy of the divine feast and gives him the precious garment he once wore.”

In this parable, we learn three main things: what it means to live in sin, what it means to repent, and the greatness of God’s love for us. May we always remember that no matter how far we have strayed from God, the road back to Him is always open. May we always be encouraged that, no matter what sins we have committed, however serious they might be, God will forgive us if we repent. Regardless of the condition we might be in, when we remember who we truly are – His children – we can walk back to the Father’s house. When we do, He will run to us, forgive us, and embrace us in His love.