

FR. JOHN'S HOMILY
Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 27, 2022

The Lenten season invites us to open our heart to God's love and grace. As we receive this Gift of God Himself, we are called to take on the nature of God. There are many traits and characteristics of God but none more important than Mercy. To receive God's mercy and to show God's mercy, is a way we show ourselves to be God's children. The message today calls us to look at how we are recipients and givers of God's mercy.

This past Friday, the Catholic Church around the world prayed a Consecration Prayer to the Immaculate Heart of Mary for Russia and Ukraine. Along with the consecration prayer, I offered up a Rosary and the Divine Mercy Chaplet. This is the closing prayer for the Chaplet: *Eternal God, in who mercy is endless and the treasury of compassion inexhaustible, look kindly upon us and increase your mercy in us, that in difficult moments we might not despair nor become despondent, but with great confidence submit ourselves to our holy will, which is love and Mercy itself. Amen.*

This is who we are called to be: an instrument of God's mercy. This is what the Lenten season invites us to open our hearts to: the richness of God's grace and mercy. There is no better parable than in Luke chapter 15, the story of the Prodigal Son.

The story of the Prodigal Son is very popular and has been the subject of many artists. One of the most famous ones is Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal*. Looking at the image, one immediately notices the prominent standing figure, the Father of the Parable, who represents God. Interestingly enough, though, he seems to be depicted as being blind. His eyes are shut, at least to the faults of his son, and he sees the wayward son not with his eyes but with his heart, on which the kneeling son rests his head.

If you look at the two hands of the Father, his left hand seems decidedly masculine and pulls the son's right shoulder toward the Father's embrace. The other hand, more delicate and feminine, seems to be caressing the repentant son's back. In this artistic narration of the parable, God is depicted with traits usually associated both with a loving father and mother, fitting enough as God is a loving creator and parent.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we find three persons, and our Lord probably intends for us who hear the parable to see ourselves in each of the three characters. The weakness and straying of the younger son we probably can easily relate to. There is not one of us who did not make mistakes in our youth. Some of us still live with regrets from the past. And if so, we need God the Father's embrace of

love and acceptance. The jealousy of the older son who doesn't get rewards for never straying we can identify with as well. The times we are envious and jealous of others for what they have or their rewards and all we can see is what we have not. We feel life is not fair, and so we wallow in self-pity. Here we need to accept the Father's invitation of mercy and come and join in the celebration. This means allowing God the Father's heart to rule our hearts.

The compassionate outreach of the Father we can likely find in ourselves too. That is part of the beauty of the parable; each character is not to represent just one type of person, but all of us are a mixture of sin and repentance, jealousy and resentment, and finally, it is hoped, overflowing compassion, forgiveness and love towards others.

The point of the parable is inviting us to become like the forgiving Father, be less like the jealous older son, and learn the meaning of love of self as the prodigal son finally learned in the compassionate arms of his father.

Like the prodigal son at times we find ourselves away from God by our weakness. Like the older son we're often absent from God's love because of bitterness or anger over what others are getting. We need to realize we are a mixture of both sons in the parable.

The parable should be called that of the Prodigal *Father*, since prodigal means recklessly wasteful, which the sons are certainly in a sinful way, however the Father is in a compassionate way.

In Lent we are to be striving for repentance, that is, walking closer with God who is ever near us, but we stray through preferring our ways to God's. You do realize there is no ending to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We don't know, for example, if the elder brother ever goes in and enjoys the feast with the rest of the household.

As we reflect upon this parable which calls us to receive and give God's forgiveness and Mercy to others. Think about the times you have been the Prodigal and returned back to the Father's House. Think about where you act like the elder son will you stay outside or go on in and rejoice over the repentant sinner, forgiving as you are forgiven? Can you show a similar loving forgiveness so lavishly bestowed by the father?

All of this should inspire us to ponder on God's forgiveness of our sins, our need to repent and to have confidence in God's mercy. And we must forgive others. I invite us to practice receiving and giving mercy and forgiveness this day, then we will know how the Parable ends, with a celebration of love and forgiveness.

(Fr. John also spoke about "The Forgiveness Prayer". It is available on our website, www.holysouls.org - Bulletin Board.)