

**Homily – Fourth Sunday of Lent
95th Anniversary of San Francesco di Paola – March 27, 2022**

95 years ago the Italian community came together to build this home of worship. It is the fruit of the religious fervor of people who found in their love of God the source of their love for one another. We have come to celebrate those bonds which keep growing between us. In that same spirit, we open our hearts as a country to receive new threatened refugees fleeing Ukraine. Pope Francis has said that “every person has a right to a future.”

Threat is what caused action and change of heart also in the gospel story today. The story of the Prodigal Son comes after the complaint of the religious leadership about Jesus’ association with sinners, and especially fellowship at table, where all were welcome. The religious leaders had harsh judgement of Jesus, and of the sinners. They were always judgmental of others who were not like them, especially those they saw as sinners, looking down on them. Jesus welcomed the sinner and helped them restore their relationship to God and the community.

The last shall be first. What is the difference between accepting the sinner and condoning the sin? The story is really not about the son, but about the father: “There was a man who had two sons” is the way it starts. It is about what it takes to maintain relationships and restore them when they have been broken.

The younger son is portrayed in the worst possible light. He is wishing his father dead, so he can have money. This is a complete break with his relationship with his own father. He is truly lost. The son’s change of mind was not due to a change of heart but to the threat of hunger. There are physical limits of what we can do, and when we reach the limits, then we must take action. Is that true repentance? Also, the younger son goes to a

foreign land and ends up tending pigs. The story presents the son as repulsive as possible to those listening to Jesus.

As great is the sin and the sinner so even greater is the mercy of God. The story is as much about the mercy of God as it is about repentance. In this case the repentance leads to feasting, an image of the heavenly banquet. The threat of physical hunger leads the son to repentance and action which leads him to the feast he did not anticipate. He is finally restored totally to the family, and to the community he offended: "My son was dead and now is alive." There is a complete reversal which only comes through God's mercy. The lost can be found!

The community was involved because the son had violated laws and traditions that were sacred to them. The father had to protect his son from the threat of the villagers as they had been offended by his actions as well. Our sin is an offense not just against God but also against the community. They could have mistreated or even killed him. The son had to be restored not only to his father but also to the community. That is why the father humiliates himself by running to the son, something a dignified man would not do. He was protecting his son as well as showing love. The father called the community to repair broken bonds.

The son did not repeat his rehearsed speech. He possibly realized this was not about money but a relationship. The son could never repay in money what had been broken. The father makes a huge gesture to show that the son is not only welcomed back but also given full status as his son.

It is also about being judgmental, as represented by the older brother. Maybe he has a point. It may have been acceptable for him to accept the brother, but not to a feast; and for him to receive some form of bread and water punishment, to live some kind of penance. It is the older son who was now lost. His judgmental attitude blinded him to his father's love. His attitude left him outside the feast and also outside the family and community.

The older son had made himself not a son but a hired hand, an entirely different relationship to his father. He only saw his relationship with his father as one of obligation, duty and obedience, instead of sharing life and love and mercy. He was also a sinner but an unrepentant sinner. One son thinks he can save himself, while the other knows he cannot.

The father responds to the older son's resentments with, "Everything I have is yours." The older brother never realized the generosity of the father and could not respond with the same generosity. The parable does not have a happy ending. We are left not knowing if the older brother entered the banquet. We do not know if the family was reunited. We are forced to ask ourselves what we would do if we were any one of the three. Do we really fully realize the generosity of God in our lives? Can we ever respond with generosity for what we have been given? Do we see our relationship to God as one of only obligations and not of sharing life and love?

Lent calls us to prayer, fasting and almsgiving, to help us deepen our relationships with God and neighbor. How do we judge others, whether it is the migrant and refugee or the person closest to us? How can we understand God's limitless love? How will we be generous to others as God has been to us? Let us truly become the family that God calls us to be.

May Our Lady of Guadalupe, who always deepened her relationship with her son, even to the cross, give us an example of commitment to be the community of faith, love and acceptance that God is calling us to become this lent.