

Ernest Hemingway wrote a story of a Spanish father who wanted to reconcile with his son, who had run away to Madrid. The father placed this ad in the paper: “Paco, all is forgiven — meet me at Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. Papa.” When the father went to the hotel on Tuesday, he found the hotel square filled with 800 boys named Paco waiting for their fathers.

That story is the story of many families. And 799 of those boys in Madrid were disappointed when their fathers failed to show up. But the Prodigal Son is happy story, so we must rejoice!

Paco and the Prodigal Son represent the natural development of every child, taken to the extreme. Even those children who don't leave home must somehow separate themselves from their parents. If they don't, they will remain forever immature. Happy are those parents and children who both realize that the function of the family is to raise mature, independent adults.

That doesn't always happen. Some parents think it is their job to control children, while some children think their parents have no right to direct their lives. And sometimes it takes a period of separation for parent and child to appreciate each other's rights.

The Prodigal Son looked for the freedom to direct his own life. But what he found was something else. He associated with people his own age who knew no more than he did, so his education was stunted. His friends wanted the same things he wanted, so he learned to fight to get his share. He learned that cheating often worked better than honesty. When he succeeded he boasted; when he failed he was envious. Finally, instead of rolling in clover he was wallowing in mud. And everyone said, “You made your bed, now lie in it.”

The problem is, apart from God's direction, our honest desires get distracted. The

desire for independence becomes arrogance; our need for love turns to lust; our longing for success turns to greed; our yearning for equality becomes envy. Before long we are all wallowing in the mire of guilt and neurosis. And everyone tells us, “You made your bed, now lie in it.”

Everyone except God, God says, “All is forgiven. Come home.” Like the Prodigal Son, we worry about how to explain ourselves. We make up excuses for our sins; we wonder what promises we have to make. We think that we have to become a better person before we go home. Not so. All we have to do is go home.

The Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, Russia, is one of the great museums of the world. It houses vast collections of art amassed by the Russian czars. Climbing the elegant marble stairway to the second floor, you will find the famous Rembrandt painting “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” An aging father bends to welcome his penitent son home again. The boy, ravaged by an unforgiving world, one sandal off, buries his head in his father’s embrace. Today’s Gospel touches our hearts on many levels. Sometimes we are the forgiving father; at other times we may be the jealous brother. Perhaps, more frequently than we would like, we may be the prodigal child, seeking the Father’s forgiveness again.

Each of the sacred texts for this Sunday references this process of turning a negative into a positive by surrendering a sinful past to the past.

Upon their arrival in the land of Canaan, the Israelites were instructed by God through Joshua to remember no more the reproach of Egypt. Instead of dredging up the memories of suffering and the failures of the desert days, they were to celebrate their Passover to freedom and renewed union with God. A new era was beginning for them, but the same Lord who had called them into being, called them forth from Egypt and guided them through the wilderness would never leave their side.

Paul evokes a similar outlook in today's second reading. Let go of the old ways of sin, urged Paul, and embrace new life in Christ. The great apostle was so convinced of the rebirth that comes with living in Christ that he called baptized believers "a new creation." Paul was also convinced that those who were reconciled to God had become part of an ongoing process — the experience of reconciliation would be extended to others through them. There is a sense of exhilaration that comes with being forgiven, and Paul was hopeful that this joy would be contagious.

Luke has a purpose in presenting us the story of the Forgiving Father. Luke's community had done very well. There had been many converts, but not all of them stuck with their new faith. This became a problem, especially when persecution developed and war between Jerusalem and Rome broke out. To protect themselves from persecution, many began to leave the community of faith. Eventually, loneliness for the Christian community led many back, but the question arose, "Can they come back?" Could those who had stayed faithful despite persecution and hardship, those who had maintained their discipline, could they bring themselves to allow those who had left to return?

Luke's story is one of reconciliation. Yes, those who had strayed, and even those who had strayed badly, should be welcomed back. In fact, as is often the case when we see the word "house" in a Gospel passage, the house stands for the Church. The Forgiving Father left the house and went to meet the Prodigal to welcome him and restore him to the house, that is, the Church. The Prodigal Son became lonely, isolated, and hungry. A return home reversed that.

The second son, who stayed, was just as distant from his father as the first. He had made himself distant through anger and resentment. Again the Father left the house to invite this other lonely son back into his house, the home, the Church. The Father wanted his two sons to be reconciled so that both of their lives might be restored. Being under

one roof again they would be in community and thus would once again look like the God who made them.

Through the Catholics Come Home program we are seeing many people who have been away from the Catholic faith coming back. We may have some coming back to our parishes. Some of you may be asking, so Deacon Dennis are you telling me even though I have been true to my faith, have always come to Sunday Mass, have participated in all the things offered by the church, supported the parish through good times and through bad with my time talents and financial giving, that if someone who left the church wants to come back I should welcome them back unconditionally. (Pause) Yup that is exactly what I am saying. That is what reconciliation is all about. In fact as our little Parish Lenten Retreat guides tells us this week, we are to stop looking at others to make it right and take up the task ourselves. We need not only to reconcile ourselves with God but with each other. It could have been because of our actions that these people left in the first place.

Our Sacrament of Reconciliation is God's gift to us. It is given not so that God could be reconciled to us, but that we might be reconciled with God. Sin can make us very lonely. It can even destroy us. We have been reconciled to God through Christ so that we will never be apart from God. Reconciliation leads to better relationships, and ultimately it leads us back into the Father's house. When we go eyelash to eyelash with God, what we will see are eyes of love inviting us in. We will hear the words we longed to hear, "Welcome Home"