

From The Pastor

What keeps us from knowing more deeply and securely the love of our heavenly Father? One aspect of the answer is that we are human creatures wounded by the woes of life. Sometimes these woes come through the experience of our sinfulness. Other times, it is just the way life unfolds in our particular environment and circumstance. As such, we become mistrusting of the love of others and of God because we feel the weight of guilt, or shame, or self-perceived unworthiness. In another way, we can be hurt by the sins of others done to us. In response to this kind of pain, it is normal to develop defense mechanisms and different emotional agendas to protect ourselves against further harm. Over time, the healthier, happier, more trusting parts of our personality can be so buried under the weight of our experience that we fail to realize the unchanging love God has for us.

One example of this is the story in the gospel about the woman burdened with hemorrhaging for twelve years. Jesus would not let her sneak away with an anonymous physical healing because she would still be burdened with the inner idea of being the sick, rejected one. Jesus moved to heal the whole person; not only in body, but in mind and spirit as well.

I say all of this to set up the importance of the opening line of the first reading today. Joshua has brought the Israelites into the Promised Land. The people have claimed the land, and are now eating from the produce they have planted. God has been faithful to his promise, doing for the Israelites all that he said he would do.

The opening verse of the reading characterizes the final gift of God to the people. ‘The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you”.’ This is a deep and important gift of love and liberation. God is giving the Jewish people a healing of memories from all the oppression and cruelty they endured in Egypt. Although this may be one generation removed from those who were actually the slaves in Egypt, the stories and the attitudes of resentment, or bitterness would deeply influence the moods and perspective of the present generation. Memories or stories regarding the memories could easily create a whole new generation of people burdened with attitudes of fear, victimization, unworthiness, self-rejection, or resentful hatred. This is the reproach that God has removed from the people so that they could see and actively live in confidence of all that God had done for them. No longer would they feel the oppression, and fear of their captors, nor the disordered memory of their hard labor.

The story of the Prodigal Son is very familiar to us. It is an essential story of love and forgiveness that should touch the hearts of all who hear it. The danger is that the story is too familiar. We can take the story for granted because we know the punch line before it comes.

Both sons are sinful, and both are in need of the Father’s mercy. It would miss the point to worry about which son had the greater sin. Both were in serious need of forgiveness. Both receive the same offer and gracious invitation of welcome; yet it seems only one of the sons is able to realize and accept the prodigal love of the Father.

The sins of the younger son are more obvious, or more public. Socially and morally, we are likely to judge the sins of the younger son more harshly than those of the older brother. If the sins of the younger brother are more public, the sins of the older brother are much more dangerous because they are hidden to others, and to himself. The younger brother reflects the tax collectors and the sinners, while the older brother is the mirror of the Scribes and Pharisees. Because they feel completely righteous and justified, it will be very difficult for Jesus to open their minds to their offense. This is why Jesus addresses the parable to them. Convinced of their righteousness, they see no need for healing or forgiveness.

What is most striking about the story is the love and acceptance of the Father. Notice how free and unlimited the Father’s love is. With no concern for his reputation or personal image, he immediately races to embrace his wayward son. Not concerned over the son’s offenses, the Father is overjoyed to see his son home safe and sound.

Maybe this is where the phrase, ‘love is blind’ comes from. Notice further that the Father is not at all concerned with any return on all the love he offers. This is clearly the love of our Father in heaven. Only God is this free to love without expecting some return. For God, simply to love is its own reward. God is as God does. God is love without question or measure. In our wounded human condition, our love is mostly conditional. We, before long, cannot help ourselves from having some expectation of thanksgiving, payback, or appreciation for the love we give.

Mercy is an interesting thing. When we need mercy, we presume to deserve it. When we are asked to give mercy, we can be very discerning on how and to whom we give it. This is not right in light of all we have freely received from God. Let us pray that God lift the reproach we hold against ourselves and those who have hurts us. They and we will be much freer. Divine mercy is God’s unlimited, freely given, unconditional forgiveness to the undeserving. That includes me, how about you?