

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

March 27, 2022

Many of you probably know that, ten days ago, on the feast of Saint Patrick, our brother, Thomas, was invited to Washington to give the blessing at the luncheon of the Irish members of the United States Congress with President Biden, Irish officials, and others present. Word is that he was a smashing success. But the abbey received one letter from an irate father who was upset that a priest associated at all with Joe Biden, an advocate of abortion. In an understandably sincere paternal concern, he wondered what he could tell his son about such a terrible happening. This man means well but he misses the point of Jesus' teaching, clearly so shown in today's gospel.

When I hear this gospel of the prodigal son, I always think of my older brother, who died a few years ago. He and his beloved wife raised five children. Three boys in one room; two girls in the other. There were many ups and downs with these kids over the years and many heartaches for the parents. But these kids adored their father and they still do.

The oldest son hurt his parents when he joined a biblical cult that demanded separation from families. No contact at all. My brother was irate that the boy ignored his mother and never sent her a note at Christmas, her birthday or mother's day. After a few years of being married and having six children, the young man realized that the cult leaders were all involved in scams of making money. Upon investigating this, he was thrown out of the cult and his wife, dedicated to the cult, threw him out of their home. He was also in deep debt over credit cards.

My nephew, like the prodigal son, came to his senses. He called his father and told him he was in real trouble. My brother did not reprimand him, or tell him "I told you so" or correct him in any way. His reply was "What can I do for you, son?" Soon the nephew made a pilgrimage of reconciliation. He came to meet and explain himself and apologize to his family. He came and spent a couple of days with me here too.

This parable of the prodigal son, or as some would prefer, the story of the Prodigious Father, is a well known part of the gospel. With its twists and turns, it

is a good story. What we sometimes miss is the reason Jesus tells the story. Some religious authorities complain that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. So to them Jesus addresses this parable. It is a good picture of what Jesus has been trying to say and what his unusual table fellowship is meant to teach. The conversion that Jesus asked of his followers from the very beginning of his ministry is a change of heart and overcoming of divisions. We are all in this story together. We must cease looking upon those different than ourselves as threatening or below us. Elsewhere in scripture we read that God shines his sun on the just and unjust alike; rains upon the good and bad alike.

As we take on the mind of Jesus Christ, we gradually give up our dualistic way of looking upon people. There are no ins and outs; higher and lowers; either or ors. We are all God's children, saints and sinners alike, loved by a merciful God who asks us to love one another.

For a priest to turn away gay people from his parish, or parents to reject their gay children, is not the way of Jesus. To exclude Blacks, Latinos, Asians, immigrants, foreigners, former convicts is not to embrace the way God sees us. And, today, even Christians are divided in how they decide what is right or wrong, good or bad.

The heart of the Synodal process that the Pope is asking of us is to learn to listen to each other, to try to understand the reasons another person may disagree with us, to be respectful and loving with all. We can disagree with each other but must avoid demonizing each other.

In today's second reading from Paul to the Corinthians, the apostle says that our baptism has made us a new creation and given us the ministry of reconciliation. We are to be ambassadors for Christ building bridges and not walls.

We are all one people on this earth, brothers and sisters to everyone. The prime root of sin is isolation that shatters the unity of all of us as one. The church is called to be the sign of this oneness, this unity and must practice the love of the forgiving Father.

We have reached the half-point of Lent. I have to ask myself is there someone, some group, some people with whom I need to be reconciled?

What can I do to change my own way of looking at such people and become a minister of reconciliation? Would I sit down at dinner with sinners and welcome Jesus to our midst?

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