

Homily – Fourth Sunday of Lent – March 29/30, 2025



Family. Are there any more complicated relationships in your life than the ones you have with your family? Either with your spouse, your children, your siblings or your parents. I know in my case, with regard to relationships with my siblings, they have probably been the most unpredictable, on-again, off-again,

difficult to navigate relationships in my entire life. This is not to assign blame for this to any particular individual, it has just seemed to work out that way over the years. We had a brother go 20 years without speaking to the rest of the family for reasons that are still unclear. We have had life choices that some have made that resulted in unnecessary alienation from other family members. And you always think there is going to be time to mend the fences later. Well, in 2004, when our mother died, all 7 of her children were gathered around her bedside for 5 days and much healing took place in conversations that were held over that time. Or so we thought. I say, “or so we thought”, because it turned out, that would be the last time all 7 of us were in the same room at the same time. My father used to say that there is nothing worse than an argument between siblings as there is very little chance that either of them will give in or admit to being wrong.

That brings us to our gospel story today. The very familiar, to most of us, story of the “prodigal son”. I have been told that as you go through life, depending on your age, you will at one time or another identify with a different person in this story. This has certainly been true for me. I have at times been the impetuous one making hurtful,

selfish decisions that damage relationships. I have been the “holier than thou” judge, looking down my nose at folks from a self-appointed moral high ground. And I have been, and I hope continue to be, the one who tries to foster forgiveness and reconciliation. I think as Christians, we would all like to be the ones who mend the fences as opposed to being the ones that replace the fences with a brick wall. But, in reality, is that who we are? I would like to share the following story with you:

A group of people known as the people of Bemba believe that every human who comes into the world is good. Every person’s deepest desire is for safety, love, peace and happiness. When someone from this group of people acts unjustly or irresponsibly, then that person is required to stand in the center of the village, alone and unrestrained. The other members of the Bemba people are called together and they gather in a large circle around the one who has been accused of some wrongdoing.

Each person gathered around the accused then begins to speak, recalling all the good things that the accused person has done throughout the course of a lifetime. Many good deeds are mentioned in great detail. All of the accused’s positive attributes, strengths, kindnesses and efforts on behalf of the common good are recited carefully by different members of the group.

When everyone has spoken on behalf of the accused one, all the members of the Bemba people break the circle and a joyous celebration takes place. The one who had committed an injustice or who had behaved badly is now welcomed back into the group and given a fresh start. Past deeds are now forgotten as celebration and reconciliation intersect. The Bemba people are stronger and more unified because of this ritual and their focus on the positive aspects of the person instead of the negative. This pastoral response, instead of a punitive one, supports the community in the face of difficult situations.

Does this sound like our culture as we know it today? Does this sound like our church as we know it today? We can have a tendency of holding people in their sin. No matter how much they try to distance themselves from that lapse in judgment, to us, they will always be that person. I have talked to so many people in my life who have said to me regarding their significant other, "I love him or her, but if they ever do that (insert your unforgiveable sin here) then I am gone. As I listen to them, I wonder if that is true. I believe they think its true in this moment, but this moment is actually only theory. Would you really throw away years spent building a relationship and a family for one mistake? Would you want them to forgive you if the roles were reversed? I know this, forgiveness, true forgiveness in these situations can only happen with the help of God, and often takes time and patience. And if we are patient and trusting, the gift of forgiveness can come at the most unexpected time.

A relatively young priest is in a hospital visiting some of his parishioners. He is walking down the hallway, and a nun stops him and says, "Father, can you go into this room? There's a man on his deathbed. He's been here for days. We've asked priests to go in, but he chases everyone away.

The priest goes in and introduces himself to the patient. The guy erupts and starts cursing at him. He is so angry: "I don't want anything to do with you. Get out of here!"

The priest says, "Okay" and goes out into the hall.

The nun is still there. She says, "Could you go back in?"

The priest replies, "He doesn't want anything I have to offer."

"Just give it another chance," pleads the nun.

The priest reluctantly re-enters the room. "I'm not going to ask if you want to go to confession. I'm not going to ask if you want Holy Communion. But is it okay if I just sit here next to your bed and pray?"

The old man replies, "I don't care. Do whatever you want."

The priest sits down and begins softly praying the words: "For the sake of His sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us and on the whole world."

Suddenly the man bursts out, "Stop it!"

Startled, the priest looks up and asks, "Why?"

"Because there is no mercy for me!"

"Why do you think there is no mercy for you?" asks the priest.

"I'll tell you... Twenty-five years ago, I was working for the railroad. My job was to lower the crossing guard arm when a train would come to prevent cars from going on the tracks. But one night I was drunk. I didn't lower the crossing guard arm, and a couple and their three young children were on the tracks as a train came, and they were all instantly killed. That was my fault. So, there is no mercy for me."

The priest asks, "Where was this?"

The man tells him the name of the Polish town.

The priest looks up and says, "Twenty-five years ago, my mom and my dad were taking my little siblings on a trip. I couldn't go with them. They were driving through this small town. For some reason the railroad crossing guard arm wasn't lowered. As they were crossing the tracks, a train came and killed them all. I lost my whole family that night." The priest gazes intently into the man's face, and he says, "My brother, God forgives you. Not only that, I forgive you."

A friend from St. Augustine's told me something years ago that I believe to be an eternal truth. He said you will not know true peace in your life until you have given and received forgiveness. So, don't draw lines in the sand. God doesn't. And don't paint yourself into a corner with ultimatums that only stand in the way of your ability to love unconditionally. My brother, who didn't talk to the family for 20 years, reached out last March to say he had terminal cancer. All of a sudden, the past twenty years didn't matter, and we were reunited. While we hoped and prayed that the doctor's timeline was wrong, it wasn't, and my brother died in December. But make no mistake, the healing prayed for did indeed happen. With God, it always does.

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