

THE PRODIGAL /Sun. June 20, 2010

Sermon: **A Father's Day Story: Through the Eyes of God**

Sermon by: **Fr. Bill Wigmore**

Tonight's first reading is taken from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. It tells about Bill Wilson's thoughts and actions in the hospital immediately following his spiritual awakening. He writes:

There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction. I admitted for the first time that *of myself* I was nothing; that *without Him* I was lost. I ruthlessly faced my sins and became willing to have my newfound Friend take them away....

My (sponsor Ebby) promised when these things were done I would enter upon a new relationship with my Creator; that I would have the elements of a way of living, which answered all my problems. Belief in the power of God, plus enough honesty, willingness and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements.

Simple, but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centeredness. I must turn in all things to the Father of Light who presides over us all.

The second reading tonight is a modern version of Psalm 139. Please join me in the reading, responding with the words in dark print:

Lord, you have searched me and you know me;

***you are closer to me than my thoughts.**

You see through my selfishness and weakness into my inmost self.

***There is not one corner of my mind that you do not know completely.**

You are present before me, behind me,

and you hold me in the palm of your hand.

**Such knowledge is too awesome to grasp; so deep that I cannot fathom it.*

*Where can I go from your Spirit? *Where can I flee from your presence?*

If I take the wings of the morning and fly to the ends of the sea,

***even there your hand will guide me and your spirit will give me strength.**

*If I rise to heaven, I meet you; *if I lie down in hell, you are there;*

If I say, "Let only darkness cover me, and may everything turn to night."

***Even there your hand will lead me;**

*For my darkness is not dark to you; *the night is as bright as the day.*

Search me, dear Lord; take me to the depths of my inmost heart.

***Root out all selfishness from me and lead me back to my Father's home.**

A reading from the Good News according to Luke:

Now the toll collectors and sinners kept crowding around Jesus so they could hear him. But the Pharisees and the scholars would complain to each other, "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" So Jesus told them this parable:

"Once there was a man who had two sons; the younger of them said to his father, '*Father, give me the*

share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his resources between them.

"Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and left home for a faraway country, where he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a serious famine spread through that country, and he began to do without. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the pigs ate; and no one gave him anything.

"But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough to eat, while here I am dying of starvation! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and affronted you; I don't deserve to be called a son of yours; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he got up and returned to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved to compassion. He went running out to him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I don't deserve to be called a son of yours any longer.'"

But the father said to his servants, 'Quick, bring out the finest robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Fetch the fat calf and slaughter it, let's have a feast and celebrate, because this my son was dead, and has come back to life again; he was lost, and now is found.' And they started celebrating.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and as he got closer to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what was going on. He said to him, 'Your brother has come home, and your father has killed the fat calf, because he has him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

"But he answered his father, 'Look here, all these years I have slaved for you. I never once disobeyed your orders; yet you never gave me even a kid goat, so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours shows up, the one who has squandered your estate with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fat calf!'

"But the father said to him, 'My child, you are always at my side, and everything that's mine is yours. But we just had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead, and has come back to life; he was lost and now is found.'"

Sermon: Happy Father's day to all the Dads here. How're you all doin' tonight?

- Sometime ago, I came across one of those **top ten lists** like David Letterman reads on The Late Show.
- **This one was called: "The Top-Ten Things You'll Never Hear a Dad Say"**
- *And Father's Day always seems like a pretty good night to read it.*
- **So here we go: Ten things you never heard come out of your father's mouth:**

Number 10 "**Well, how 'bout that! ... I'm lost! ... Looks like we'll have to stop and ask for directions.**"

Number 9 "**You know Pumpkin, now that you're thirteen, you'll be ready for un-chaperoned car dates. ... Won't that be fun?**"

Number 8 "I noticed that all your friends you bring home seem to have a certain "Up yours" attitude"... **I really like that!"**

Number 7 "Here's a credit card and the keys to my new car ... **Why don't you GO CRAZY!"**

Number 6 "What do you mean you wanna play football?
Figure skating's not good enough for you, son?"

Number 5 "Your Mother and I are going away for the weekend ...
you might want to consider throwing a party."

Number 4 “Well, I don't know **what's** wrong with your car Probably one of those “**doo-hickey thingies**” – *you know* -- that makes it run or something.
*Just have it towed to a mechanic **and pay whatever he asks.**”*

Number 3 “Now Listen up! No son of mine is going to live under this roof **without an earring!** –
So quit your belly-aching, and let's go to the mall!”

Number 2 “*Whaddya wanna go and get a job for? I make plenty of money for you to spend!*”

And the Number 1 thing you never heard your father say:
“Would you mind turning that music up a bit!”

We read tonight's gospel story a lot more often than the once every 3 years it comes up in the regular cycle.
And that's because, being an addict, when I hit on something I like,

I've got this deep-seated urge to do it **more than once.**

... And if I like something **a whole lot** – ...**well, you know how that one goes!**

And of all the stories that Jesus ever told, **tonight's** is my personal favorite.

I love it because, *whenever I hear it I hear Jesus telling my story* -

*And you probably **hear yours** being told too.*

... *Most of us who wind up in these rooms, just couldn't wait* to leave home and get out from under all the rules. We grabbed what we could - and we headed for the bright city lights.

We wanted to go where the action was. And we found it.

*And in the beginning, we all had our fun at **partying** -*

*But as time went on **and as our addictions took us to some places we hadn't quite bargained for** – then some of us probably woke up staring at a pig or two who wasn't exactly a part of our plan!*

And if **your “far country”** led you to **the crack house**, then whatever money *you had* probably went *right up in smoke* and that famine that Jesus talks about, it *came quicker to you* than to most.

But what I think makes this such a rich story is that the same events in the story can be looked at **through three different sets of eyes.**

- If we **view** it through the eyes of the prodigal son, then it's a story about **guilt & repentance** - A story of hitting our bottom - “coming to our senses” and then slowly **making our way back home.**
- And if we look at Jesus' story through the eyes of the older brother, then it's a story about **the price we pay for our pride** and the lonely place that “**un-forgiveness**” always takes us to.
- **Then finally**, we can look at Jesus' story through a third set of eyes – **through the eyes of the father.**

And that's really who this story is about.

See, Jesus tells this story – because once again, he finds himself in trouble with the holy people and with the religious leaders of his day.

Those people are asking him:

- “*Jesus, why are you hanging out with prostitutes and with tax collectors?*”
- “*Why are you making friends with all the sinners in town and having so little to do with us? We're the good people in this town!*”

- ... And so Jesus answers them – and he says, “*Do you really want to know why I'm doing this? Because if you do, then listen and I'll tell you a story about a father who had **two sons.***”

*And in telling them his story, Jesus invites his listeners to **see all the people they look down on** – He invites 'em to see them through a different set of eyes.* He invites them as Willie Nelson said in our hymn: “**To put**

on *the eyes of God*" - and to see just like this Father sees.

- And what the Father sees in his first son is a definite case of: **"self-will run riot."**
- **This kid wants *what he wants and he wants it all right now.***
- ...We kind of miss some of the punch in this scene – *but back in those days* a kid didn't get **anything** from his father until his father was dead and buried –
- So what this kid's really saying here is: **"Why don't you drop dead old man so I can get what's coming to me!"**
- The people hearing Jesus' story would have expected the old man to knock *the hell* out of that kid.
- *Any father* in the crowd would have done exactly that –
- **Right on the spot** he could have hammered the kid for saying that and everyone would of said, **"He got what he had coming!"**
- ... **But this father doesn't say or do anything like that.**
- **This father** just looks at his son *through eyes* filled with sadness and overflowing with tears. He respects his son's freedom and so he won't impose his own vision upon him.
- **If his son is ever to return this old man's love** it has to come **freely**.
- And so he watches as his kid packs his stuff and *defiantly* goes off to live life on his own.

But apparently the father wasn't able to let his son go completely.

Maybe just before he left, the father had a little *co-dependency slip* – because he wants to send a *small piece of himself* to travel along with his son on his journey.

And so it seems, the old man tucks a memory *deep inside* his child's heart & mind.

- It's a memory of what today we'd call **the TRUE SELF**.
- **A memory** of who the kid truly is – and what he truly wants and **where alone** he can truly find it. And so *as the kid* travels farther and farther away from his Dad the more *this memory* starts pulling and tugging at him, **inside** –
- **He's "restless, irritable and discontented."** It gnaws away at him by day and it keeps him awake at night.

And as **all "the stuff"** he'd gathered around him *to kill the pain* – **As all of that's** taken away from him **bit by bit**, then that memory moves closer & closer to the surface of the kid's mind.

And finally, when things in his life are at their absolute worst -

and when the kid is at **his absolute bottom**,

that's when the memory of his father bursts through into his consciousness.

- **"Why am I living like this when I could go be a servant in my father's house and have so much more than I've got right now?"**

And we might want to pause here and take notice of just what the kid's real motivation is for going back home.

- **See, it isn't cause he misses his Dad!**
- **And it isn't cause** he's sorry and wants to make amends and maybe *go do a 9th step* with his old man.
- **No**, at this point of the story – **the kid's just hurting - But he's still self-centered and he's still lookin' out for Numero Uno.**
- What he wants now are **three-hots-and-a-cot** and he knows that even the servants in his father's house *have that*.
- (*But that's* seeing this story *through the kid's eyes again* and not through his father's.)
- Jesus says *while all of this is going on in his son*, **the father's eyes stay fixed** – The Father's eyes stay looking out *on a hill* that's off in the distance.

They're staring at the same hill that his son climbed **and disappeared behind** when he left home years ago. **And now the old man's waiting. He's waiting and he's watching – Watching for his lost child to come walking over that hill just one more time.**

And when that day finally arrives -

when he spots his kid way off in the distance –

then Jesus says: the old man drops everything

and once again, he makes a total fool of himself in front of all his neighbors –

Instead of waiting for the kid to *come to him* and beg his forgiveness, as any of them would have done,

this father hikes up his robes and says, “**pride and decorum be damned!**”

He goes running down that road with his heart pounding -

stepping into puddles and maybe tripping a *time or two* along

the way – **but he doesn't care.**

He sees his kid! And he wants him back in his arms!

And so when he reaches his son –

the father wraps his arms around his boy, he hugs him and he kisses him and

he welcomes him back into his home.

And when the son delivers *the manipulating lines* that he's practiced and planned on that long walk home –

the lines about “taking him back in and just letting him live like a servant” –

Notice that the old man doesn't pay his plan any attention at all.

It seems: **God always has a better plan for us than we have for ourselves!**

This father says to his servants:

“Put rings on his fingers and new clothes on his back.

Light the fire - throw the good steaks on the grill – the one's we've been saving! Let's have a party!

Because this son of mine was lost and now he's found –

He was dead and now he's come back to life!”

Jesus asks, “Do you want to know why I hang out with sinners

and with all the ones who think they're lost?

It's because the God and Father I know loves them –

He loves the hell out of each & every one of them!

Whatever hell it is that other people see in them

& whatever hell it is they see in themselves – He just loves it right out out of 'em!

- Jesus *blew the minds* of the people who first heard his story.
- He turned their understanding of God **absolutely upside down.**
- ... **Rotten sons** are welcomed home –
- ... **Good sons**, *too proud to come into the feast*, are left standing outside in the cold.
- It seems to be our human nature to screw things up.
- Jesus says: It seems to be God's nature to un-screw!
He does for us – what we cannot do for ourselves.
 - God loves and God forgives what our own egos would call “the unlovable and the unforgiveable” in us.
 - God loves and forgives it in us /
 - and then he invites us to go do the same with one another.

... Now I'd like to **close us up tonight** with another, *much shorter story*, that's also about *the nature of God.*

It's from the Buddhist tradition but I think it gives some added insight to Jesus' tale.

Maybe the other story we've heard so often that it's lost its power to shock us.

And this one's about an old man who used to get up

and meditate early each morning under a big tree on the banks of the Ganges River.

- And one morning after he'd finished his meditation, *the old man opened his eyes* and he spotted a scorpion *floating helplessly* there in the water.

And as the scorpion was washed *closer to the tree*, the old man stretched himself out on one of *the long roots that branched out into the river* – and he reached out and he rescued the drowning creature.

- **As soon as he touched it, ... the scorpion stung him.**
- **Instinctively**, the man drew back his hand.
- But a minute later, *after he had regained his balance*, he stretched himself out again on the roots to save the scorpion.
- *This time* the scorpion stung him so badly with its poisonous tail that his hand turned swollen and bloody and his face contorted with pain.

... *And just at that moment*, a **passerby** saw the old man stretched out on the roots struggling with the scorpion *and he shouted*,

“Hey, stupid old man, only a fool would risk his life for the sake of an ugly, evil creature. Don’t you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?”

- The old man turned his head and looking into the stranger’s eyes he said calmly, ***“My friend, just because it’s the scorpion’s nature to sting, that doesn’t change my nature -- to save.”***

... ***“My Father is good”*** – Jesus says, ***“He’s very, very good!”***

- The Father that Jesus reveals to us is better than we could ever imagine –
- **And, speaking for myself, as a recovering scorpion, far better than I ever deserve.**
- Don’t settle for seeing anything less! Don’t stay out in the cold!
- *Come join the feast!* ***Amen.***