

Three words in the Bible are an absolute game changer. They do not appear in today's readings, but they are the foundation of all that today's readings have to say. They are arguably the center and linchpin of all the scriptures, and in truth, all of God's dealing with the human race; and at the same time the most difficult concept for us to bang through our think skulls and to allow to sink into our hard heart-of-hearts. Those three words come from the First Letter of St. John Chapter 4, Verse 16. "**God is love.**" St. John precedes this proclamation by stating, "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us." And then he goes on to talk about how this love is the basis for our salvation and our response to that love is the motivation for our striving to live a certain moral way of life. To make this long story short, we do everything we do because we realize the great love of God who loves us first and loves us best. Until we truly realize this, there's something we don't quite get as disciples.

We call the story in today's Gospel the Prodigal Son, but it's God who is prodigal, that is he gives on an extravagant, lavish and what some might judge a "foolish" scale. And what he gives is his love, his mercy, his forgiveness and his welcome. What we often don't hear in the story is that both sons have been in the wrong. The young one is not wrong because he spent foolishly, but because he disrespected his father and his family, taking what they had worked hard to achieve and squandering it as if it were nothing. But the older brother is in the wrong also because carried a seething anger, even hatred for his brother that wanted to see him cut off and cast out.

Jesus told this parable to confront the scribes and Pharisees who were complaining because Jesus didn't kick the tax collectors and other "sinners" to the curb as the scribes and Pharisees thought he should. The religion of the scribes and Pharisees had no mercy, no forgiveness in it. Their religion welcomed only those who thought and acted as they did. Jesus had no use for such self-righteous elitism and makes it clear that this is not the way of the Kingdom of God. Eventually that same group of self-righteous snobs will hang him on a cross to be rid of him.

A young man I talked with this week started out talking about doubt. As we talked it became clear that what he was really questioning was whether God really loved him and if he would ever be good enough for God. I had the profound pleasure of assuring him of the truth of the three words of St. John that I began today's homily with and I assured this young man that no matter what he did or thought he had done, God's love for him is the only non-negotiable. He would always be the beloved son of God. As that sank in, he began to relax and it seemed that the weight of the world lifted from him. The tears began to well up in his eyes. He was on his way home. He had found his way into the Father's welcoming embrace.

Many people need to hear the lavish message of love, mercy, forgiveness and welcome that Christ extends to each and every one of us no matter what has caused us to drift away or how far we have drifted away. And that "no matter what" is very important. Any message that says you're too sinful, too tainted, too dirty, too far gone, too whatever to approach God or for God to take you back

is not a message coming from God but from the devil. These aren't pious thoughts. They just keep you from the one person who can help you – God. The love of God for you is always the non-negotiable. He always wants you back and there are no strings or conditions attached except that you want to come back. No matter what you've done or how guilty you feel, you are always the beloved son or daughter of God and he always wants you to come back to Him.

If you don't personally don't need to hear that message, you can be the messenger God uses to bring it someone who does. Who in your life do you know who needs to hear God's message of love, mercy, forgiveness and welcome? Leave all judgments at the door, and play the role of the prodigal father who lavishly loves, forgives and welcomes home someone who needs it. You are created in the image and likeness of God; don't be afraid to imitate him in this. He won't mind and you'll be a part of something truly amazing.