

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
Fr. Chad S. Green
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
11 September 2022

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14
Psalm 51
1 Timothy 1:12-17
(2 Corinthians 5:19) Luke 15:1-32

Humility: Who God Is and Who We Are to Him

Throughout this summer, we've been following Jesus in this long portion of the Gospel of Luke, known as the Journey to Jerusalem.¹ Along the way, Jesus has been revealing to us His Wisdom; teaching us about the characteristics necessary to be His disciples. It's a Wisdom that the world not only doesn't understand, but also a Wisdom that the world rejects. Yet, blessed are we to hear this Good News, and to have the opportunity to share it with others! In order to better share it with others, we must keep learning His Wisdom, and growing in those characteristics.

Four weeks ago, I preached about my experience of working at solving a Rubik's Cube with my nephew. I shared with you that working on the Cube over and over again—persevering at starting back at step one each time we made a mistake—helped us begin to understand the logic—or the wisdom—of the Cube. Through that repetition, we were being transformed from a mere set of hands blindly following instructions on a page, to people who were understanding *why* the instructions had to be followed a certain way in order to reach our goal of solving the Cube. That's exactly what it means to be a disciple. A disciple is one who has learned and continues to learn.

Our life as disciples of Jesus Christ is meant to be the same. We're meant to keep on learning from the life of Jesus and putting it into practice in our own life. Going back over the lessons over and over again. Not just blindly following instructions on a page or in a book. But becoming better and better at understanding *why* those instructions (we could also call them the Commandments, the parables, the teachings of the Church, etc.) are written the way they are

written. *Why* things don't work so well when we ignore them, cut corners on them, or flat out disregard them as out of date, not applying to me, or changeable.

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Another word that we use to describe the characteristics of a disciple of Jesus is the word *virtues*. Virtues are habits for doing good. (On the other hand, *vices* are habits for doing something evil or harmful.) We acquire virtues through a combination of our own effort, supported and guided by God's grace.²

Throughout this summer, Jesus has used encounters with people just like us to teach about both virtues to work towards, and vices to avoid. Such as:

- Martha and Mary: Avoiding envy and anger; the importance of being rooted in Jesus.
- Two brothers arguing about an inheritance: Avoiding greed; being rich in what matters to God.
- Parables about being vigilant stewards: Avoiding sloth; being prepared; for, it's only when we're *not* prepared that Son of Man comes when we do not expect.
- The occasion of a fancy dinner party: teaching about the virtue of humility; and how the deadly sin of pride often brings with it all the other deadly sins: anger, envy, greed, sloth, lust, and gluttony. Humility is essential for our relationship with God to be properly ordered. For helping us to remember God—when it's so easy to be distracted and think only of ourselves. For helping us remember to turn to God in prayer at all times. And for remembering our 100% reliance on God for all that have.

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All these lessons on virtues and discipleship that Jesus has been teaching us the past three months are so important. Yet, they have served as a prelude for what is revealed in today's Gospel. Which is not so much *about* discipleship or *about* the characteristics of a disciple or some things *about* God and His Wisdom.

Today's Gospel is not teaching us *about* God and His ways, as much as it is revealing to us *who God is*; and who we are to Him. This chapter of Luke is often referred to as the "heart of

the Gospel” or “the Gospel in the Gospel” because it contains the core and essence of everything that Jesus came to teach us about God.³ That God is relentless—and even illogical in human terms—in His pursuit of each one of us.

Rather than cutting his losses when one out of a hundred strays—He pursues that one.⁴ Rather than seeing it a waste of time to look for a measly coin—He turns up everything and looks in every crack and corner until He finds it.⁵ Rather than forgetting about the child who deliberately offended Him and then turned away and left—He watches the horizon every single day for months and years, waiting and hoping for the smallest sign of His child coming back so that He can run to him, embrace and kiss him, and celebrate His return!⁶

This brings us back to the Wisdom of God that the world does not understand and even rejects. Just like the Rubik’s Cube example, if God’s Wisdom remains to us just instructions on a page, it won’t really change us. We have to move beyond instructions on a page; beyond understanding His Wisdom in our heads. We have to experience God and His Love for ourselves. We might initially process God’s Word with our minds—but we have to let it pierce our hearts in order for our conversion to become deeper and deeper.

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Today’s Gospel contains three well-known parables, including the one that is so beloved and commonly known as *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. All three are important, but this one is essential for us to spend time meditating upon and learning from. And re-learning from. It’s one that is popularly chosen as Scripture to reflect upon and pray with during a retreat.

One might reflect on it, and recognize times in their life when they identify with the younger brother. One might reflect on it, and recognize times in their life when they identify with the older brother. Realizing that there are *two* sons to learn from in this parable helps us see

that this parable might be better called *The Parable of the Lost Son*—since each son is revealed as “lost” in some way.

Ultimately, being able to identify with *both* brothers—understanding how each one is “lost” in some way—is the key to understanding the Wisdom of God. It’s the key to growing deeper in our personal conversion as disciples of Jesus Christ. In particular, it’s the key to growing in the virtue of *humility*—the most important virtue for a disciple.

Remember, humility is not so much lowering oneself—that is still somehow focused on *oneself*. Rather, humility is first and foremost about our remembering God; about our relationship with God. It’s being able to recognize and accept our complete dependency on God for everything. It’s being able to see things in the right order. It’s being able to see reality as God sees it.

The Parable of the Lost Son teaches us two important lessons about God’s Wisdom, God’s perspective, about who God is and who we are to Him. The two lessons on humility:

Lesson #1 (the lesson of the younger son): I am so beloved and precious that—no matter how far I stray; no matter what I do—I always remain someone that God the Father sees as worth waiting for, worth looking for, and worth celebrating over when I return.

That’s the first step in our conversion: allowing ourselves to be loved by God. That’s not always easy to do. Just as it wasn’t easy for the younger son. He returned to the Father, but with the idea that he would no longer be called a son. There can be an awkwardness in meditating on and allowing ourselves to receive God’s Love and Mercy.

I’m reminded of these signs on the side of the road that I’ve seen driving up Union Hill in Redmond. Maybe you’ve seen them, too. They say things like: “YOU ARE LOVED” and “YOU MATTER”. Whenever I drive by them, my first thought is, “How does that person know that *I’m* loved and that *I* matter? That person doesn’t even know me. He doesn’t know if I’m

smart, funny, attractive, or popular. Or, if I have an important job or make a lot of money.” But, you see, that’s the world’s wisdom. The world’s wisdom waits to see if someone deserves to be loved or does something to show that they matter, before making such a statement.

However, these signs are showing God’s Wisdom. The person who put those signs there doesn’t have to know me to know that what those signs say is true. And, whenever I drive by them, after those first initial self-doubting thoughts, I do feel my spirit lifted. Because God’s Wisdom is true and it lifts the spirit.

Lesson #2 (the lesson of the older son): Not only am I so beloved and precious in God’s eyes. But, so is every other person. Therefore, it’s not only right to celebrate when I return to God. It’s also right to hope for, wait for, and celebrate when any and every other person returns to God.

If I’m not willing to participate in that celebration for myself as well as each person. If there’s a part of my heart that is unwilling to celebrate myself or another person. Then it’s good to ask myself—and to ask God to help me recognize—what the blockage is. To ask, “Why do I want to deny that joy and celebration to myself? Why would I want to deny that joy and celebration to a fellow brother or sister of mine? Why would I want to deny that joy and celebration to God?”

And then, give the Lord time to answer and reveal what the blockage is. What needs to be healed in my heart—that only God can heal. And to ask and thank the Lord for the gift of a deeper understanding of His Wisdom, and a deeper experience of His Love and Mercy.

¹ Luke 9:51-19:27 (Thirteenth through Thirty-first Sundays in Ordinary Time)

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Glossary:

VIRTUE: “An habitual and firm disposition to do the good. The moral virtues are acquired through human effort aided by God’s grace; the theological virtues are gifts of God (CCC 1803).”

CARDINAL VIRTUES: “Four pivotal human virtues (from the Latin *cardo*, ‘pivot’): prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. The human virtues are stable dispositions of the intellect and will that govern our acts, order our passions, and guide our conduct in accordance with reason and faith (CCC 1805, 1834).”

VIRTUES, THEOLOGICAL: “Gifts infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life. The theological virtues are faith, hope, and charity (CCC 1813).”

³ William Barclay, “The Shepherd’s Joy” in *The Gospel of Luke*, 199: “There is no chapter of the New Testament so well known and so dearly loved as the fifteenth chapter of Luke’s gospel. It has been called ‘the gospel in the gospel,’ as if it contained the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus came to tell.”

Also, Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg, “Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time” in *Come Follow Me: Discipleship Reflections on the Sunday Gospel Readings for Liturgical Year C*: “This chapter is the heart and center of Luke’s Gospel and in it we hear parables of divine mercy and reconciliation.”

⁴ Luke 15:4

⁵ Luke 15:8

⁶ Luke 15:20