

*Readings*

Jos 5:9a, 10-12

Ps 34:2-3, 4-5, 6-7

2 Cor 5:17-21

Lk 15:1-3, 11-32

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Andrés G. Niño, O.S.A.  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

The grand parable of the prodigal son describes, in splendid narrative detail, God's mercy toward sinners. Somehow it summarizes the good news of the Gospel and is so central to the Christian imagination that readers and listeners throughout the ages have been profoundly touched by the story. Augustine, a prodigal himself, makes this insightful remark about it in his *Confessions*: "What is it in the human heart that makes us rejoice more intensely over the salvation of a soul which is lost than for one who is kept in the fold? The joyful solemnities of your house drive out our tears when the story of the prodigal son is read there; how he was dead but comes back to life, was lost but is found" (VIII, 3, 6).

Augustine's question leads us through a reflective exercise that focuses on the universal *striving towards happiness* that carries us wherever we go (III, 3, 3). And along with it goes the impulse to explore and experience whatever it may be. The problem is that, following our own ways that affirm our powers of being, knowing and loving, the concern with God is easily and frequently obscured or discarded. And as we move farther away, in search only of "temporal and earthly felicity, to which end they do all they do" (XIII, 17 20 we become vulnerable to the illusions created by our culture. In many influential aspects of our lives culture has taken up the role of religion offering us a plethora of distractions, subliminal messages of fulfillment, and exciting new roads to happiness. The result is that we become spiritually worn-out, surviving only on our limited wits and resources. And ultimately lost in a wasteland of dispersion.

We are told that eventually the prodigal sits down exhausted and sunk in his misery. For some people, the experience of dispersion may be the endgame, a twisted search that either drives them away adrift, or into despair. Augustine, also overwhelmed, stopped one day to look at the emptiness he felt within himself. He began taking stock of the situation and asked a

piercing question: “Was that life I led any life at all, my God?” (III, 3, 4). To answer, one needs to silence the noise of the unquiet, internal and external, to be able to listen an interior voice that echoes in our restless human hearts. It is a time for honesty and regret.

The parable emphasizes this critical moment because it opens the possibility of a subtle transformation that begins by “*coming to senses*”. One has to allow memory to do some working through past personal experience. We need to retrace in God’s presence “our ways” and confront our illusion of freedom in order to find our true selves and set our lives in the right direction. Augustine realized that here there is no room for self-reliance. The awakening of the mind comes from God’s mercy that “all the while, far above, hovered faithfully about me” (III.3, 5). Actually God did even more: “You raised me up so that I could see that there was something to be seen. I realized that I was far away from you (VII, 10, 16) ... and under your guidance I entered into the depth of my soul” (VIII, 9).

However such awareness must be followed by the courage to act. In the parable we hear the moving words: “*I shall raise and return to my father*”. Here is the son struggling to survive and reaching out to the abiding truth of his father. How long does it take to move forward? For some the decision may be made right there, in an instant. For others, to resolve the inner tensions of a divided will might take days, perhaps years. It is a movement of the heart prompted by the radical trust that, as Augustine says, “We have not been yet wrenched out completely from the unity with the perennial truth” (X, 33.50). That is, God’s unfailing love and his “covenant of mercy” (Lk 1:35-46). The decision ‘to raise and return’ brings together the primal trust of a man and the grace of God: “Away I wandered, yet I remembered you. I heard your voice behind me, calling me back ... see now, I come back to you” (XII, 9, 9).

The father had been waiting for the arrival of the prodigal, as if he has never been away. The time of human wanderings runs through the timeless love of God. Because, we are, always in the presence of God and “where can we go that we be out of his sight?” Augustine found out that the recognition of one’s sins is an important element that acquaints us with our own limits, urges us to sort out our motivations, and helps us to listen to the voice that comes from our conscience. Most importantly it sustains our hope in God’s forgiveness while we seek and walk towards him. The time has come to speak and the parable carves from the depths of contrition a

few solemn words: “*Father I have sinned against you*”. Augustine adds: “Through your own merciful dealings with me, O Lord my God, tell me what you are to me. Say to my soul, ‘I am your salvation’. Say it so that I can hear it. My heart is listening, Lord” (I, 5, 5).

We need to examine our maladies and narrate those insights “out of the depths” (ps. 130) as a healing task towards an honest cleansing. Confession throws us into the embrace of the Father. The experience is one of life restored, that the prophet says “opens a way in the sea, puts water in the desert, and rivers in the wasteland ... See I am doing something new!” (Isaiah 43: 16-21). The Father who waits from the beginning has always been there at the end of our human stranded ways. And his embrace is the gesture that reveals the one important thing in life and the meaning of the journey becomes clear. In this closure brought by God’s merciful love our hearts find rest.

It is time to celebrate because now we know what makes us react with joy to the Lord’s parable. In a mysterious mirroring effect, “our joy is expression of the indescribable joy of God” (VIII, 3, 6). And prompts us to pray with Augustine: “Oh how much higher are you than the heights, and how much deeper than the depths! You never depart from us, yet how tardily do we return to you! Come, O Lord, I pray. Arouse us and call us back; kindle us and take us to yourself. Set us ablaze and cast your sweetness over us. Let us love you and run to you” (VIII 4, 9).