

Many years ago, long before I was a deacon, I had the opportunity to accompany some of our young parishioners to the Diocesan Catholic Youth Conference in Mankato. At one of the sessions the group leader was going to have some of the kids act out the parable of the Prodigal Son. When he asked for volunteers, several hands went up, some more enthusiastically than others, and he began to pick a few guys and gals from the crowd. He soon had just about everyone he needed but there were these three girls down near the front that just kept waving their hands and begging to be part of the program. Now I had noticed these three young ladies earlier in the day. They were, you might say, the “cool girls”. Or at least they thought so. They had the cool clothes and cool hair. And I remember they were always whispering and giggling throughout the earlier activities of the day, even when it was inappropriate. But their pleading finally worked and the leader gave in and told them they could take part and to go and stand on the other side of the gym for the time being.

There was no practice or planning. The leader just read a section of the story and at the same time the volunteers would act out the part. And so they went through the story with the prodigal son asking for his inheritance and leaving home, then foolishly blowing all his money, and eventually finding himself penniless and hungry. And then... the leader had the young man playing the prodigal son walk to the other side of the gym, toward the three “cool girls”, ... and he read the part where in desperation the son hired himself out... to feed... the swine.

You should have seen the look on the “cool girls” faces when they realized which part they had been given in the story. It was a combination of shock, horror, and pain. But, I give them credit. After a moment of realizing their predicament a couple of them tried to get into it.

It seems they learned the lesson that we never really know what part of the story we may find ourselves playing some day.

The beautiful parables in today's gospel passage are known as the "Mercy Parables" for obvious reasons. And I suspect most of us have recognized ourselves or someone we know in one of the characters. Just last week Father Tom mentioned his grandparents searching for money they hid and could no longer find and this week we heard the parable of the woman and the lost coin.

But what about the characters in the parable of the prodigal son? How many of us here have played one of these roles in our own life? How many of us had a lapse in practicing the faith or even lost our faith altogether? Perhaps in college or after a particularly challenging episode in life? Well if you did, and you're obviously here now, then something, or someone, must have led you back. Go to any good Catholic retreat or conference and there is always someone sharing their story of falling away from the Church and then coming back. What you find is they, as well as converts, usually have the strongest faith of anyone.

What about another character in the story? How about the older son? I'm embarrassed to say that's the part I played in my youth. I'm the youngest of six and there was a time when one of my sisters was trying to convince another sibling to stop wasting time living on the "wild" side and come back to the family. Like the elder son in the parable, I said a few things I wish I hadn't because I was jealous and didn't think we should be embracing our black sheep sibling. But I was looking at it all wrong. What I didn't realize *or visualize* is that our black sheep was really a lost sheep that needed to be brought home and loved back into the family.

And “loving” and “welcoming” back was, of course, the action of the true hero of today’s story: the Father. The Father is our merciful God who would have every right to reject us when we take the blessings he has given us, our talents, our youth, our health, and we walk away from Him and waste it all on one foolish endeavor or another. Have you ever seen the part in “The Fiddler on the Roof” when the father shuns the daughter that married a non-Jew? In the parable, the father could and, according to tradition, should disown and disavow the son. But our Father, the one who created us in His image, does not. He waits in hope that even though we’ve done our best to sever the relationship, we will come to realize our foolishness; that our youth, our beauty, our health, and our wealth won’t last forever. Maybe we begin to feel the loneliness and hopelessness that a life based on material possessions can’t satisfy. Or maybe we see the sincere joy in those who choose to love, and give, and sacrifice for others and that reminds us of who we are, a child of a God, and the potential that allows us.

How many in the world have been affected by the life and example of Mother Theresa, now Saint Mother Theresa, of Calcutta? Like the father in the story today she loved and gave and sacrificed. Regardless of who she encountered, no matter the color of their skin, or their faith, she viewed them as children of God who deserved to have their needs cared for. By her actions she reminded those she cared for that the God she served was waiting to welcome them home.

So in this year of Divine Mercy we should first remember the unending merciful love the Father has for us. To Him we are the lost sheep and the lost coin, a treasure that He longs to find and keep safe. Today let’s hold that thought with us and rejoice. If we have wandered far

from His love, let us return home, He's waiting with open arms. And if we have remained close to Him, let us guide and welcome back our brothers and sisters who have strayed from the course. It doesn't matter if we've played the part of the prodigal child, or the jealous sibling, or dare I say... even the swine, on occasion. In the end we are called to be loving merciful fathers and mothers ourselves, waiting, praying, and scanning the horizon for another child of God looking to find their way back home.