

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time C

Jesus used a lot of stories to teach very important lessons for life, to teach who God is and how we should relate to Him. Today's gospel is a perfect example of Jesus' ability to teach, using stories that are very powerful. Those stories give us deep insight into the very nature of God. These are parables, and parables are not to be taken word for word. But instead they are to be understood for the message they convey. They contain subtle but deep messages. The parables that we heard today in the gospel passage is all about the love, forgiveness, and generosity of God. Our God has always been a God of mercy and forgiveness—someone who searches for the lost. In the second reading of today, Paul tells us that though he was the greatest sinner, God's mercy found him. He persecuted the Christians. He consented to the killing of St. Stephen. He did everything possible to make the lives of Christians miserable. But God's mercy transformed him into a warrior for the gospel that he once tried to destroy with all his might. God's mercy can do amazing things for us if you believe and turn to it. He does not give up on us.

On a late night there was a knock on the door of Rose, who was a divorced woman, living all by herself. When she opened the door, she found a couple of policemen who had come to ask her to pick up her daughter Jill, who had been caught for the fifth time for drunk driving and without a license. Jill was in her early 20s, divorced, and her only child was brought up by her Mom. Rose went to the sheriff's office to get her daughter, and all the way home they did not speak a word. They did not speak the whole next day, and the third day was Jill's birthday. The silence was terrible for both. So the mother broke the silence by giving her a small gift. The daughter opened the gift, and it was a rock. She said, "It is cute, Mom. But what does it mean?" The mother told her to read the card. She opened the card and it read, "That rock is a million years old. That is how long it would take for me to give up on you." Tears began to roll down her cheeks, and she gave her Mom a hug. They both wept for a while, and Jill said, "Never again, Mom." She gave up alcohol and never drank again.

She put herself through school, got her Master's in education, became a teacher first, then a principle. She completed her PhD, and today she is a superintend of schools in the Bay Area of California. This is what mercy and forgiveness can do. If human mercy and forgiveness can do so much, how much more can God's mercy and forgiveness do?

The parable of the prodigal son tells us that there is no limit to God's mercy and forgiveness. The father did not ask the son what he did with his wealth because he knew that he was truly very sorry. The son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am not worthy to be called your son." Our God is a God who seeks the lost and rejoices when a sinner repents and returns to Him. Jesus said, "There is a great joy in heaven when one sinner repents than over 99 righteous persons who have no need of God's mercy." To the repentant thief on the cross Jesus said, "Today you shall be with me in paradise."

God loves us so much that he gave us a free will to choose. In today's term, we would say that the prodigal son made a "bad choice." That is the modern way of describing a sin. "He made a bad choice." That is a polished and sanitized way of viewing sin. Today we would like to hide everything and make everything appear nice. So we would like to call it a "right to choose" than legalized killing or "equal rights" than perverse living. Sin is more than just bad choice. What the prodigal son did was far worse than a bunch of bad choices. Fortunately, the parable of today tells us that God's mercy and forgiveness are infinite. He is crazy about us. If He had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it. If you are in sin, this is the time to return. His mercy is seeking you. Let us get crazy about him and seek his mercy.