

The 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of St. Luke's gospel tells three parables of God's love and mercy. Today's parable of the prodigal son could also be called the parable of the merciful father. Because it is the patience and the mercy of the father in the story that stands out; it is his joyous reaction upon the son's return that we find surprising and even strange. The waywardness of the younger son and the self-righteousness of the older son are both quite human. These characters we can understand and identify with. But it is the father and his mercy that command our attention today. God the Father deals with sinners in love, patience, and mercy.

The parable of the prodigal son is found only in St. Luke's gospel. St. Luke was trained as a medical doctor. Being a doctor naturally made him more focused upon healing and restoration which probably made this story stick out in his mind more than in the minds of the other gospel writers. The message of divine mercy preserved by Luke remains an important one for every generation especially our own.

It has been said by some Catholic commentators that our modern culture is one in which everything is tolerated and nothing is forgiven. In other words, we are told by Hollywood and the news media that every approach to life must be accepted and tolerated. All morality is relative. Moral truth is whatever you choose for it to be, we are told. Who are you-*church*-to say mothers should not kill their unborn children? Who are you-*church*-to say members of the same sex can't get married and adopt children? Who are you-*church*-to say I can't abandon my wife and children? And if you dare say some behavior is sinful, then you are intolerant and a bigot. Everything is tolerated. Yet nothing is forgiven. Because there are no sins, there is no need for repentance and mercy. No need for healing and restoration.

Just this week the tolerance police found a new target. Gay activists, politicians of both parties, and the news media went after the

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Peter Pace. What was his crime? He dared to say that homosexual actions are immoral. By voicing an opinion that is consistent with sacred scripture, sacred tradition, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the natural law, General Pace committed the one mortal sin still recognized by modern society: he was intolerant. The barrage of negative attention was so great that he was forced to issue an “apology” for voicing *his personal opinion*. Apparently the only people allowed to have a personal opinion are those who favor moral decadence and deviancy.

Not surprisingly this brave new world of moral relativism and militant tolerance has not brought about a great civilization of love and mercy. In fact, it has brought about the opposite. Our culture is crass, harsh, mean, merciless and getting worse. Our world needs mercy not tolerance. And the parable of the prodigal son offers insight into the key difference.

God does not tolerate sinners; he loves them and has mercy upon them. Toleration is a very neutral stance toward something. At best it indicates indifference. To tolerate means to ignore something or someone. It means you will basically put up with it or them. You will live with its presence or their presence though you’d rather not have to. Is that really a proper response to another human being? Don’t we owe each other more than toleration? Doesn’t Jesus command that we love our neighbor as ourselves? We owe our brothers and sisters love and mercy. But love cannot exist apart from truth. And mercy requires repentance.

When the younger son goes to the father in our parable to demand his inheritance and then sets out to live a life of sin and dissipation, the attitude of the Father was not one of tolerance and indifference. Yes, he allowed him to go. Yes, he respected his free will. But he never stopped hoping for his return. He actively longed for and waited for his son to

come back to him. He never stopped loving his son but neither did accept his son's sinfulness. That is why the father was overjoyed upon catching sight of him "**while he was still a long way off.**"

After he had freely spent everything he received from his father, the son found himself "**dying of hunger,**" Jesus tells us. He longed to eat the food of the pigs. This small detail in the parable indicates just how low he had fallen. Pigs were considered by the Jews to be unclean animals and could not be eaten or even touched. And here was a Jew longing to eat the slop eaten by the unclean animals. The effect of sin, the effect of turning our backs to the father, the effect of broken communion with God and his "household," the church, is de-humanizing. A life of dissipation brings with it lost dignity. While he was with the father, when he was in the father's house, the son had dignity. That dignity had become completely lost.

The son was given the grace to recognize what he lost and the grace to long for its return. He determined that he would go to his father and admit his sin. "**Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called you son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.**" The son rehearses his line of confession on his way back to the father. But so eager is the father to embrace the son who has come back to him, the son can't finish the line. He can't get it all out before the father places a ring and a robe upon and embraces him. The feast begins. The son's dignity has been restored.

Mercy restores. Tolerance ignores. The son's humility and repentance bring him back to the father's house. Our world needs the humility to accept the truth that God has revealed about human morality. Our world needs the grace to repent. Our world needs more mercy not more tolerance. We, as individuals, need the humility to repent, because we want friendship with God not indifference. We want mercy and love not tolerance.