**4th Sunday in Lent – Cycle C: Luke 15:1-3, 11-32**

**Spiritual Reflection**: The parable of “Prodigal Son” is deeply rich and can be viewed from several vantage points—the prodigal son, the elder brother, the father’s servants or the father himself. Arguably, it was told for the benefit of self-righteous Pharisees and scribes (filling the role of the elder brother) who were accusing Jesus of eating with sinners. Our saint and the book’s narrator take the perspective of the “Merciful Father”. “Lord how rich is your heart in mercy and how generous is good will,” our saint proclaims. The father, “filled with compassion, ran to his [prodigal] son, embraced him and kissed him,” even before the prodigal son fulfills the promise he made to beg forgiveness and be treated as a servant. Notice too, the father’s merciful action to his pride-filled, hurt, obedient and pious elder son. “he came out [of the house] and *pleaded* with him,” calling him “my son” confessing his presence “always” with him and proclaiming, “*everything* I have is yours.” These are absolute and unbounded statements, far from the limited singleness of the embrace, kiss, ring, robe and fatted calf celebration given the prodigal.

How ready are you to be that openly forgiving? In the role of the father, would you have waited for the prodigal son to fulfill an act of contrition – to say the words – before you would have ran to him, embraced and kissed him? Why or why not?

Is the mercy shown by the parable’s father only achievable by Our Father or is that level of mercy available to earthly fathers or anyone who has been grievously wronged, misled or taken advantage of? Is mercy a grace of God given to us or is it an act of the will? How does this relate to God’s merciful love to respect our freedom of choice?

The author notes that “the father treats each [son] as individuals, according to their own personal needs.” Are you able to show mercy and love in this way? What is Jesus showing us about boundaries? Can you adjust your cup or mercy to “overflowing” for the Hope (trust) of a heart moving towards reconciliation, indicated simply by coming home or being present? Why or why not?

Are there any other “actors” who are involved in this battle within your soul to allow God’s likeness to flow from you? What would motivate these actors?

The father repeats himself to the elder son and to his servants that “we must celebrate and rejoice because the prodigal son was dead and has come back to life, was lost and is now found,” but the father’s servants tell the elder son that the reason for the celebration is that the prodigal “came back safe and sound.” Why do you suppose the father’s servants are unfaithful in repeating the reason for the celebration? What other story in the Bible can you think of where the Word of the Father is unfaithfully corrupted? What is Jesus trying to tell us about our accountability to the command of mercy? Is there a warning here? Explain.

**Wednesday in the third week of Lent: Matthew 5: 17-19**

**Catechetical Reflection**: In the gospel reading, Our Savior tells us that he has come to fulfill the law and prophesy—emphasizing the need to obey with the Law, even the smallest letter of it. Our saint, reflecting on this, calls us to “Do all through love and nothing through constraint. Love obedience more that you fear disobedience.” As you likely know there are two parts of the 10 Commandments, the first 3 are about how we are to love God, and the last 7 are about how we are to love our neighbors. No one likes to be told what to do. It seems to be a collar on our free will. We cannot do whatever we please. We are challenged by our saint to “love obedience”. The Definition of Obedience in the CCC takes four distinct forms… 1) Obedience to God (the divine Law), 2) Obedience to the Church, 3) Obedience to civil authority and 4) Obedience to Our Parents.

Where are you on the “love obedience” scale? As Americans we pride ourselves in independence, and freedom to choose. Do you find it hard to submit yourself of the Law? Is a duty? A chore? Or do you find it easy to just do what you are told? Is this freedom? Do you see willful (freely chosen) obedience to the law as freedom? Why or why not?

Do you see obedience to the Law as the same or different when compared to obedience to the precepts of the Church – come to Mass on Sunday, Sacrament of Confession once a year, etc? Do you find it easier to obey the commandments or the precepts? Why?

Do you believe that obedience to legitimate civil authority is a duty for Catholics? Read CCC 1897. How does that square with your understanding. How does that move you to take action? What are we called to do when civil authority acts immorally?

As Young Adults establishing our own person, separate from our parents, how do you view the need to obey your parents? Does this commandment end when we reach the age of majority? What if we get married? When does the Law allow us to stop obeying our parents? Are there limits to this obedience? What are they and when do they apply?

**Friday of the Third Week in Lent: Mark 12:28-34**

**Biblical Reflection**: Our gospel reading harkens from the foundations of our faith and that of our Jewish brothers and sisters. The first part is taken from the first two verses of great Shema Prayer (Duet 6:4-5) which extends through verse 9, calling Jews to teach their children, take of this in their homes and on the street, when you sleep and when you awaken and place it on your foreheads, and your hands and above the door of your home and even the gate to your home. The second part is taken from Lev. 19:18, which also warns us to not hold grudges or take vengeance against another. Notice who the beneficiaries are (others). Notice the source of commands for each (God). Now our saint tells us, “Just as God created ‘man in his own image and likeness’ so also has he ordained for man a love in the image and likeness of the love due to his divinity”. Notice St. Francis is showing us that the love of God is within us (likeness of God). Let’s us be aware that in each face, we are capable of loving each of God’s created human souls.

Are you aware or recognize the capacity to divinely love others (likeness of God) – every soul God has created? If not, are you willing to allow the love of Christ to shine forth to those you find difficult, troublesome or sinful? Why or why not?

What changes would you need to make in your life, in your thinking, in your heart, in your prayers, in your confessions, to enable the transformation of your soul to reveal the likeness of Christ within you?

Imagine someone whom you consider to be an enemy or offensive to you. Imagine you are about to meet them in a narrow hallway (just the two of you). How would you react? Now imagine the same situation, replacing the face of that person with that of Jesus? How would you react? Would you differently, knowing, as we should that the Holy Spirit (who is God) resides is that soul, regardless of the face on the soul?

Since, as we have learned, loving another is doing what is best for another, imagine another situation where you are about to meet with a person you have strong feelings for. What are your next thoughts about how you might hope the situation would unfold? How would your thoughts change, or would they, if the face of the Blessed Mother or the face of Christ, or the Crucified Christ were on that person.

 What does this tell you about the orientation of your heart and the meaning of loving another?