

The love of Jesus impels us.

In December 1983, a man in a white cassock went to visit a man in a blue sweater, blue jeans and white slippers from which the laces were removed. The man in white was Pope John Paul II. The man in blue was Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who tried to kill the pope, several months before, in St. Peter's Square in Rome.

Pope John Paul II went to visit Ali Agca in prison for one reason: to tell him, "I forgive you." TIME magazine described the incident in this way: "...last week, in an extraordinary moment of grace, the violence in St. Peter's Square was transformed. In a bare, white-walled cell in Rome's Rebibbia prison, John Paul tenderly held the hand that had held the gun that was meant to kill him. For 21 minutes, the Pope sat with his would-be assassin... The two talked softly. Once or twice Agca laughed. The Pope forgave him for the shooting. At the end of the meeting, Agca ...pressed the Pope's hand to his forehead in a Muslim gesture of respect." When asked what they talked about, the Pope said, "I spoke to him as a brother whom I have pardoned." That's leadership!

Today's Gospel tells that the leadership of Jesus led people to say of Him: "**This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.**" This was the complaint against Jesus raised by Jewish leaders known as Scribes and Pharisees. Yet, it is the heart of the Good News that Jesus came into the

world to reveal. This is who Jesus is: a man who welcomes sinners, the Beloved Son who was sent by His Father, not to give us what we deserve, but to give us what we need—mercy and redemption through the Cross.

Jesus also teaches us, in this Parable, that sin has terribly destructive repercussions. It separates the sinner from God and from others. The Prodigal Son takes his inheritance and goes to a far distant country. The further he goes from his Father, the more his life deteriorates. So, it is with you and me. When you and I sin, we make ourselves miserable. We have only One Father and we are all His beloved children, no matter how far we withdraw from Him. But that distance from Him measures the distance we have separated from happiness.

The Older Son also separates himself from his father, because of sins of a different kind. He is so full of anger that He refuses to enter his Father's house, refuses to join in the banquet. He is convinced he has a right to be angry. "You're not fair!" he shouts. His anger is so great that he destroys the fundamental relationships of his life. He never once says "Father." He refers to his brother as "this son of yours." He does not want to be known as a son or brother. That's what hell is like.

There are only two times in the New Testament when any words of God the Father are recorded: first, at Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan, and

then at His Transfiguration on the mountain. On both occasions, the Father says the same thing of Jesus: “**You are my beloved Son.**” Of all the Father could say, why these words? Because this is Jesus’ identity. God is love. Of the three Persons of the Trinity, the one word that identifies Jesus as distinct from the Father and the Spirit is Son.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, the key word He taught them is “Father.” Jesus described His Father in the following way (Jn 3:16), “**God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life.**”

Today’s Second Reading (2 Cor 5:17) begins with these words, “**Whoever is in Christ is a new creation.**” That is the wondrous gift we receive in Baptism: rebirth as a beloved son or daughter. To understand the full import of being “a new creation”, it is good to recall the words of Jesus, recorded just 3 verses before (2 Cor 5:14), “**The love of Christ impels me.**” Here is the key to Paul’s fruitful leadership. Everything He did was energized by Jesus’ love. Moreover, St. Paul knew that Jesus’ compelling love continues to energize people in every age. It is the key to effective leadership—something, I trust, that graduates from CALL have learned from their parents and teachers over the past several years.

We also can learn from the elder brother. If the younger brother teaches about self-centered mistakes and humble repentance, the elder brother teaches us about cold perfectionism and proud self-

righteousness.

Many who aspire to be leaders have some “elder brother molecules” racing through our veins. These are evident when we are overly-eager that things be done exactly right; when we don’t approve of parties for sinners, and second chances for offenders. Elder brother syndrome rears its ugly head every time we refuse to forgive.

Granted, the elder brother was not all wrong. There is much to admire in him. He was dutiful, dependable, reliable. When he gave his word, he kept it. When he was given a job, it got carried out. He tried to be honest, he tried to do things right. None of those qualities are called into question by Jesus. However, more than justice is required in life. The elder brother was missing mercy. He lacked the ability to forgive. He wanted nothing to do with mistakes nor with the people who made them. Thus, in the end, he denied that he even had a brother: **“Your son...”** he says to his father, **“When your son returns...for him you slaughter the fatted calf!”** The elder brother decided he would love only perfect people. As soon as someone did wrong, he cut him out of his life. Of course, this is not love at all. And it even means he will never love himself, for he will never be able to measure up to his own standards of perfection. Genuine love sets no such boundaries.

And that brings us to the merciful Father in the parable. The Father loves both his sons, despite the great differences between them. He goes

out to meet both his sons, the prodigal and the self-righteous. And he wants both sons to rejoice and share in the feast of forgiveness.

Actually, both sons were surprised by the Father's extravagant love. The younger son agreed with his elder brother that he did not deserve to be treated as a son. He asked to be treated as a slave. He was amazed at the ring placed on his finger, and the shoes on his feet, and the fattened calf that was slaughtered for the feast. It never crossed his mind, he never imagined that his father would rejoice and celebrate his plea for forgiveness and do so with such extravagant gladness.

Of course, that is the point of the parable: God, who truly is our father, loves us beyond all proportion to what we deserve. Heaven help us if He gave us what we deserve!!! God is more merciful than we could dream of. As St. Paul writes, **“Glory be to God whose power now at work in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine.”** Eph 3:20

One final point: did you notice that this parable is left unfinished?

We do not know if the elder brother ever came in to the party or if the younger brother remained “repentant and reformed.” Jesus left the parable unfinished to make it clear that its drama continues to be played out in the lives of us all. We can either consider ourselves better than others, set above and apart in a state of proud loneliness, refusing to forgive, demanding our “rights”, and harshly judging others' mistakes.

Or we can accept the Father's invitation, along with the prodigal son, and celebrate the mercy of God. We can, as the Psalm (#34) today says, **"Taste and see the goodness of the Lord."**

The leadership needed today begins in the family. God calls us to love our sisters and brothers, to honor our mother and father, to be true to our husband or wife in good times and in bad. This requires us to forgive and to say, "I'm sorry." We must bear with one another willingly.

Forgiveness and mercy are more than something God does; they are something God celebrates. For the love of God surpasses the demands of justice. His mercy is everlasting. And thus, the Father says in the parable: **"My son, ...But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."**

"Taste and see the goodness of the Lord."