

March 6, 2016

Fourth Sunday of Lent

My child, you have always been with me and all I have is yours. You should be happy and dance because your younger brother who was dead has come back to life

Do we prefer to see God punishing others from doing what is wrong, or do we rejoice at seeing God loving others out of doing what is wrong?

The Prodigal Son's Older Brother

I would like to share with you an article I read this past week by Fr. Ronald Rolheizer, OMI. It is titled: "*The Prodigal Son's Brother.*"

"Recently, while giving a series of lectures, I was confronted by a rather angry man who accused me of being soft on hell, God's judgment and God's justice. Though angry, he was, in his own way, a good man, one who had given his life in duty to his family, his church, his country and his God. 'I cannot accept what you say,' he shouted at me. 'There is so much evil in the world and so many people are suffering from other people's sins that there must be, after this life, some retribution, some justice. Don't tell me that all these people who are doing these things—from molesting children to ignoring all morality—are going to be in heaven when we get there! What does that say about God's justice?'

"This man's lament is, in fact, quite an old one. The prophet Isaiah had the same kind of wish. For him it was not enough that the Messiah should usher in a time of peace and freedom for good people. He felt there also needed to be too a "day of vengeance" on the bad (Isaiah 61:2). Interestingly, in a curious omission, when Jesus quotes this text to define his own ministry, he leaves out the part about vengeance (Luke 4:18).

Whether in conservative and liberal camps, we, like this man, often have the same burning need for punishing. We want to see misfortune fall upon the wicked. It is not enough that eventually the good should have their day; the bad must also be positively punished. If we are conservative, we wish this especially on those who neglect their religious duties or do not follow the sixth commandment. If we are liberal, we want God's vengeance on the perpetrators of injustice.

"This desire for justice (as we call it) is, at its root, unhealthy and speaks volumes about the bitterness within our own lives. All these worries that somebody might be getting away with something and all these wishes that God better be an exacting judge, suggest that we, like the older brother of the prodigal son, might be doing things right, but real love, forgiveness and celebration have long gone out of our hearts.

“We are often bitter as slaves and are quite outside the circle of God’s love. Far from basking in gratitude in this beautiful symphony of relaxed, measureless love and infinite forgiveness that makes up heaven, we easily feel instead the bitterness, self-pity, anger that was felt by the older brother of the prodigal son. We find ourselves sitting in the banquet room, amongst all that radiance and joy, pouting, waiting for the Father to come and try to coax us beyond our sense of having been cheated.”

“In the end, it is because we are wounded and bitter that we worry about God’s justice, worry that it might be too lenient, worry that the bad will not be fully punished, worry that there might not be a hell. But we should worry less about those things and more about our own incapacity to forgive, to let go of our own hurts, to take delight in life, to give others the sheer gaze of admiration, to celebrate and to truly join in the dance. To be fit for heaven we must let go of our bitterness.”

“Like the older brother, our problem is not the excessive love that is shown someone else. Our problem is that we have not fully heard God’s words to us: ‘My child, you have always been with me and all I have is yours, but we, you and I, should be happy and dance because your younger brother who was dead has come back to life!’”

Not being like the Older Brother

Families mirror God’s relationship with us. They don’t lift each other out of what is wrong by punishing them, they lift each other out of what is wrong by loving them. This is the way of God. God does not love us “*if and when*” we change, God loves us “*so that we can*” change. Let us not be like the older brother who does things right, but with real love, forgiveness and celebration long gone from our hearts.

*Do we prefer to see God punishing others from doing what is wrong,
or do we rejoice at seeing God loving others out of doing what is wrong?*

We need to be careful where we stand on this, because what we choose for others is what we are choosing for ourselves. We have been applying this to ourselves. Now we need to apply this to our nation.

My child, you have always been with me and all I have is yours. You should be happy and dance because your younger brother who was dead has come back to life