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Fourth Sunday in Lent – “Coming Home to God’s Merciful Love through Reconciliation”

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Reading 1 Joshua 5:9A, 10-12

The LORD said to Joshua, “Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you.” While the Israelites were encamped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, they celebrated the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth of the month. On the day after the Passover, they ate of the produce of the land in the form of unleavened cakes and parched grain. On that same day after the Passover, on which they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased. No longer was there manna for the Israelites, who that year ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.

Reading 2 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Brothers and sisters: Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.


Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So to them Jesus addressed this parable: “A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, ‘Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.”’ So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But his father ordered his servants, ‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’

Then the celebration began. Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. The servant said to him, ‘Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. He said to his father in reply, ‘Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.’ He said to him, ‘My son, you are here with me
always; everything I have is yours. 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.”

**HOMILY**

It ended about a week ago – you may not have known it was happening, maybe you were
temporarily distracted and didn’t take notice of it. Now, you may have heard the expression, “The stars
were in alignment,” when a certain event occurred. Well, there was a rare planetary alignment in the pre-
dawn sky to the south and southwest – “The planets were in alignment,” if you will. Five planets just
happened to be in an alignment of sorts – a rare enough event, as it hasn’t happened in over 11 years. For
all you star-gazers, astronomers, and would-be astronomers out there, this event may have been
interesting and important enough that you even waited up for those late night and early-morning skies to
clear to see this event.

So … while many of us may like to look at the evening and night skies, most of us aren’t
astronomers, either real or would-be. And, we shouldn’t believe that the alignment of the planets, or the
stars, or any celestial bodies, have any effect on our lives, either now or in the future. … But, as Catholic
Christians, there is an event coming up that is worth talking about, and there is an alignment of sorts that
is pointing to it, and it does affect every one of us, maybe directly, probably indirectly, both now and for
the rest of our lives here on earth. With that kind of build-up, what is this event? – returning to God,
reconciling ourselves and others to God, coming home to God’s word, aligning ourselves with God’s
merciful love! And what are the items pointing to this reconciliation? First, you have probably heard by
now that we are well into the Jubilee Year of Mercy, proclaimed by Pope Francis to begin last December
– we are now about a quarter of the way through it. Hopefully, you have been taking advantage of that in
your spiritual life so far. Second, we have this marvelous Gospel reading today, the story of the Prodigal
Son, from Luke. I have heard some people say that the story might really be called the Merciful and
Forgiving Father, because they believe that’s the primary focus … we’ll get back to that soon. Third, this
coming Wednesday, just a few days away, all of the Catholic Churches in the diocese of Rochester are
offering a Day of Penance, a day highlighting the importance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, of
reconciling ourselves to God, of coming home to God’s merciful love – 12:30 to 7:30 PM, this
Wednesday. Haven’t gone in a while? Just show up – Father will help you through it. Now, I think
that’s a pretty strong alignment of sorts, but if you need still more for me to back up my claim, consider
that both the 1st and 2nd readings from today align with the Gospel reading – now that’s also a rare
occurrence – and all 3 focus on reconciliation with God. Do you think that the Holy Spirit, through the
Church, is trying to tell us something here? Do you think maybe the Holy Spirit is helping us to
understand we should be trying to align our lives with the merciful love of God? Bringing ourselves and
others home to God’s merciful love?

Let’s take a closer look at today’s readings. In our 1st reading, from the book of Joshua, God had
led the Israelites to the Promised Land – they were finally there, they had come “home.” It was a long
and hard journey, 40 years in the desert, a struggle they had to overcome, to fully realize and appreciate
God’s merciful love. From our reading, “The LORD said to Joshua, ‘Today I have removed the reproach
of Egypt from you.’” They were reconciled! … So they celebrated, they rejoiced, they ate of the
Passover, the great feast!  In our 2nd reading, Paul tells the Corinthians, “God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, … and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” God’s reconciliation is double-sided – God is reconciling us to Himself yet asking us to spread that message of reconciliation to others, to be “ambassadors for Christ”! And, in our Gospel reading, the story of the Merciful and Forgiving Father, we might think to ourselves that it’s a nice story of a wayward son returning home and, yeah, it’s nice that the father accepted him back, why wouldn’t he? And, celebrating that he’s back – that’s a real nice touch to the story. But, think back to the time of Christ, and the customs of the times, and how the Pharisees and others would react to this story when they heard it. For example, did you know that a younger son would receive one-third of an inheritance at his father’s death, but half while his father was still alive? Also, we often see pictures of this story where the father is welcoming his son at the end of a long road and there’s the estate house way off in the distant background. However, people didn’t live on the land they farmed, but in close-quarters with each other in villages. Now, the older son knew that his brother had squandered the inheritance on wickedness, prostitutes, debauchery, so the father must have known this also, and the whole village must have known, for that matter – everyone knew. Finally, the son went to a distant country, we are told, so he essentially abandoned his cultural and religious home. He gave up everything – his family, his home, his religious identity, his country. So, how humiliating it might seem for the father to run up to greet his son, in front of everyone in the village … how humiliating to welcome him … home. Rather, consider it an act of merciful love for the father – to accept his son, back home and into the family again. And, similar to the 1st reading, they were reconciled, so they rejoiced, they celebrated, with a great feast!

Who needs to be reconciled with God’s love, who needs to be in alignment with God’s love? We all do, don’t we, no matter how far away we have drifted! What stops us from admitting that sometimes? It could be any one of a number of reasons. How about pride? How often do we hear someone say, with regards to the Church, or any authority, including our parents, when we’re young, “Nobody’s going to tell me what to do!” That may well have been the reason the younger son left his father’s house.

Maybe we take issue with one or more of the Church’s teachings and we really don’t think the Church understands our position – well, maybe we don’t fully understand the church’s position, either. The place to begin to work that out, and to be reconciled with God’s merciful love, is with a priest. How about those of us who may misinterpret the application of peace and justice in the world, or the respect of all human life, from conception to natural death, and we need further clarification of Jesus’ teachings? Maybe we need to build bridges with others, and not just put up walls … if we should even do that. Maybe we need to protest against Planned Parenthood, and not the Supreme Court, and ask that the federal funding be directed towards other, more ethically-inclined neighborhood health centers. If we truly examine our individual consciences, we may find other areas that need to be resolved. Maybe we need reconciliation with other members of God’s family, and that we need to build bridges with family members or former friends. From our Gospel reading, the two brothers were in that situation. Remember, a priest can help.

How about all of us? We all need to determine whether we are being too soft or too hard on ourselves. Matthew Kelly notes that talking to a priest in the confessional is a wonderful way to get guidance, as well as grace.
My good Catholic Christian brothers and sisters, we all need to be reconciled to God, and we all need to help others we know – our family members, close friends – who need that reconciliation, that coming home to God’s merciful love. In modern terminology, “It’s all good” when that happens. It is all good, being reconciled with God’s merciful love. And all of the events that I mentioned are in alignment to point that way now – the Year of Mercy, all 3 readings, the Day of Penance. Still not convinced? I’ll even add one more – our tri-parish retreat with Fr. Jarema is over the next 3 days, and we are going to have spring-like weather that will encourage us to get out of the house and take advantage of it.

Our God is an all-loving and all-merciful God. Now, you may have to wait several more years for those planets to be in alignment again. The events I mentioned merely reinforce the reconciliation we can find with God. But unlike those planets, we don’t need to wait years. We can find reconciliation with God’s merciful love this coming Wednesday on the Day of Penance, any Saturday during scheduled hours, or anytime at all, by making an appointment with a priest.

Our God is an all-loving and all-merciful God, who now invites us to join in our celebration, our Eucharistic feast.