

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on the 4th Sunday in Lent, 14 March 2010. To God be the glory.*

My first quiet day was at my field education parish near Stanford University. The rector said, "Well, you should lead the Lenten quiet day." So I did. I don't remember what I said, but I do remember being struck by many people. They weren't there because of me--they didn't know me--they were there because the parish had created a culture in which people turned out for the Lenten quiet day.

My second quiet day was at a monastery in Vermont, the Weston Priory, a place that some of you may know. The leader was the late Henri Nouwen. For that Quiet Day there were people who drove hours to attend the day with Father Nouwen, and even now, posthumously, Henri Nouwen's most of his books are still in print. And so it is that for me the story of the prodigal son is like a tether which yanks me front and center to hear again Nouwen's Dutch accent speak about the *Return of the Prodigal Son*, Rembrandt's painting, upon which he bases his most popular book, also by the same title.

You won't be surprised to come here this morning to hear a sermon about forgiveness, it is after all, one of the biggies. In my work as a pastor I've heard many people say something, you may have said too, or felt it. It goes like this: "I can forgive, but I'll never forget." And as much as I understand the statement, it's a source of terrible malignancy.

In this parable from the gospel a young man asks for his inheritance now while he can use it. He blows it having a good time, ends up on the street, takes a job feeding pigs on a farm. Then, in one of the greatest phrases in the Bible, "he came to himself." Realizing that he could do better eating what his father's slaves cast off, he decides to confess and beg to be a hired hand. He goes home, and his father greets him with open arms and puts on a party for him. The older brother, the good, upright boy scout, is a seething cauldron of resentment. To the prodigal the father says, you were dead, but now are alive, to the elder he says, all I have is yours.

This is a story to take away with us, letting it work on us and in us. Remember too that Jesus told this story because people were grumbling about his eating with tax collectors and sinner, hanging around so-called unacceptable people. And instead of citing a law or enforcing a rule, Jesus taught by telling a story.

There are 6 or 8 blogs which I follow relatively regularly. Most of them are churchy blogs, but not all, and among them is Rabbi Karyn Kedar's blog. Rabbi Kedar serves a congregation in Chicago, and is known for her preaching and writing. Maybe this modern parable which she tells will be of some help to you as you take the ancient one from Luke's gospel home with you today.

There were two sisters, both in their 60s, who came to Rabbi Kedar for counseling. Their father had just died, and they wanted to share their grief and sense of guilt. The father had been a very controlling sort, and involved himself with every aspect of their lives. And as they talked Rabbi Kedar could see for herself the sisters' different coping styles.

One shut herself off. She'd left home when she was young, saying, "I have to get on with life. Dwelling on him is not useful." But what Rabbi Kedar saw was that even as the sister said those words she was all wrapped up with her cancerous anger. The other sister seemed eager to understand her pain. She'd been in therapy for a while, and was obviously still wrestling with things, but she lacked confidence. She'd suffered an ugly divorce, the criticism of her sister, and countless others who basically told her to stop dwelling on the negative and get on with life.

The sister who ran away felt the other was too weak and self-indulgent, and the sister who was struggling felt the other was not in touch with her emotions. It might sound like a lot of people you know, or yourself; I know I can hear parts of myself in these two sisters.

Later Rabbi Kedar wrote, "I saw them both stranded on the riverbank of conflict. One refused to engage the challenge God had placed before her. The other was locked in a hold she refused to release. Neither was ready to forgive their father--or each other."

Take it with you, the parable from the gospel. Apply the characters to your life, inviting them to help you. Decide what you'd do if you played any of the characters, and don't be afraid to struggle with the story. The parable which Jesus told is a story about God, and our struggle with God. It's a story, not a statute. It's about every one of us, our capacity to deepen life, and ultimately to forgive. Forgive. Forgive your parents, your lover, your friends, your boss, your church, maybe even your God.

Doing so means that we'll engage whatever inner demons we have, and that we might meet for the first time our inner angels. Simon Wiesenthal, who lost 88 members of his family in the Holocaust, once said, "Forgetting is something that time takes care of but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision."

If someone has wronged you, it's your decision whether you'll let her or him define your life. Forgiveness, as Nouwen pointed out so powerfully that day in Vermont, is mostly about defining ourselves as ones who want to walk in freedom. We musn't be afraid to give up our resentment. In doing so we just might discover that we have new clothes, a ring on our finger, a party in our honor, and peace in our hearts