

[Readings: Joshua 5:9, 10-12; Ps. 34; 2 Cor. 5:17-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32]

As a liturgical season, Lent has had a bad rap as a time for glumness. We aren't even allowed to say the word "alleluia" because it's too happy! Maybe it's the penitential purple that casts a shadow on these weeks or the knowledge that we are moving ever closer to Holy Week and the cross. It's a time for fasting, sacrifice, and challenging ourselves with the task of conversion. It is also the premiere season for reconciliation. Lent is, from every point of view, hard work.

And yet the Roman Missal calls Lent "this joyful season," and we set aside this Sunday, Laetare Sunday, or as I like to call it, "Manly Rose Sunday" for a certain deliberate buoyancy even in a time earmarked for buttoned-down spiritual discipline. Even without the alleluias, we find ways to rejoice! Because when it's time to celebrate, even the color of the season can't stop us.

Knowing when a celebration is in order is as crucial as the celebration itself. When the Israelites led by Joshua got as far as Jericho, it was time for the Passover feast. But they were commemorating more than the 40th anniversary of their deliverance from Egyptian slavery that year. Israel was also acknowledging that they had made it through the desert wilderness, past the generation caught in the old ways at last and preparing to settle in the land of Canaan.

This was the day the manna ceased, which might seem an odd way to begin a celebration. The loss of the free lunch surely rattled the complacency and security of more than a few Israelites. But the manna was a gift from God to sustain a dependent people. Once they had attained the Promised Land, they no longer needed a divine handout. It was time for them to become self-reliant and to enjoy the harvest of the land they would work for themselves. We can think of the conclusion of the manna as a kind of ancient Labor Day in which a liberated people finally embraced what it means to be free and in charge of their own fate. Without independence, as every young person knows and most of us still remember, liberty remains only an illusion.

In today's Gospel, another story of independence starts out rather badly. One of two brothers approaches his father for his share of the inheritance and sets out on his own. A young man freshly removed from his father's house with lots of money burning a hole in his pocket sounds like disaster waiting to strike. And it was: Before long this young person was broke and humiliated. His lack of judgment was no surprise, because here was a fellow who couldn't wait for his father's death to receive his inheritance! Here was a fellow so full of *chutzpah* and with no sense of appropriate timing that he went out to celebrate for the sake of celebrating. The party wound down when the money was gone, and he found himself predictably friendless.

We can certainly sympathize with the older brother, who considered the return of his worthless kin an occasion for offense. According to any worldly standard you can measure by -- just deserts, the work ethic, simple evolution --this young fellow has squandered his place in the gene pool and deserves whatever hard times he gets. But the father doesn't use a worldly standard to measure his son. He loves him. He worried about him, looked for his return, and saw in the very fact of his survival a reason to rejoice.

Another way of looking at this story is to think about freedom, God's and ours. Our free will gives us the choice to take the high road or the low road, for grace or for sin. The young man in the Gospel story chooses the low road, and his father freely chooses to forgive him, *carte blanche*, for everything.

The only person in the story who doesn't exercise his freedom is the older brother. He has bound himself to his brother's sins. A free person can show compassion, but a slave can only serve his master. This older son is mastered by the spirits of anger, self-righteousness, and a rigid sense of justice. It's particularly telling that the *older* brother still lives at home, even after the younger son had set out on his own. The older brother, evidently, has not embraced his independence and does not want the responsibility of human freedom. He still gets his daily manna and prefers it that way. God keeps all promises even when we don't, and God is forever willing to be reconciled with us.

God promises to provide for us, to feed us, to love us. All we need to do is trust in God.

How well have you kept your end of the bargain? During what times in your life have you found it hardest to trust that God is with you, at your side?

Have you experienced the joy of God's all-consuming, forgiving love so vividly described in today's Gospel? When did that happen? For me, it is when I am hearing confessions and bringing back home someone who has been away for years. Or when I give a homily at Mass, and someone comes up to me afterwards and says: "your words were meant for me today."

Saint Paul tells us that "whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away." At this half-way point of our Lenten retreat, what part of yourself do you feel is most a part of your new creation in Christ?

Only a free people can celebrate. The older brother can't even come into the house or in contact with the spirit of celebration. But celebration is not an option in the life of faith. When the lost turns up found, no matter how deliberately lost or in what condition found, God calls such a day a holiday.

This is why Lent is a 40-day celebration, despite the days when we don't eat meat or even much else. This season of reconciliation is one long party in God's eyes. Folks who have been out of touch with the Church or any kind of vital prayer life have crept closer, drawn by the public sign of our ashes and the natural signs of the budding spring around us. Those who would be new members are spending these weeks making final preparations to join us in full communion at Easter.

All of us, no matter how active we may be in attendance, have been invited to move a little deeper into our faith commitment and to examine what holds us back from the work of love. Lent might seem a little Purgatory from our point of view, but speaking in Heavenly terms, it's a celebration. The more we take part in the spirit of reconciling our lives with the person we were born to be, the more there is to celebrate. AMEN!