

If you remember, last week we reflected on the way that Jesus' call to conversion is always followed up with an invitation to communion. We see that dynamic played out in a particular way in today's Gospel. The opening words tell us that "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.'" The Pharisees and scribes did not like the fact that Jesus was inviting sinners into a relationship with Him. In their mind, their very presence would defile anything they touched, so these sinners should be shunned and not welcomed to the table.

In response to this, Jesus gave the famous parable of the Prodigal Son. We have all heard this parable many times and probably even seen it depicted in artwork, so much so that it is sometimes hard to see it anew. In order to see it with new eyes, I decided to reflect on art depicting this parable. The first one that I viewed was, of course, Rembrandt's famous painting which depicts an old compassionate father embracing his penitent son. This tender painting manages to encapsulate the prodigal son's conversion and the father's compassionate response. It reminds those who see it of God's compassion for us and His willingness to take us back whenever we repent of our sinfulness and return to Him.

As powerful as this image may be, I was equally struck by an earlier etching by Rembrandt which stands in stark contrast to his more famous painting. In this etching, the prodigal son is shown having long unkempt hair and an almost bestial face. Through this, Rembrandt is revealing that sin destroys the beauty of our souls, rendering us like animals. It is in the moment of conversion and encounter with God, when our sins are forgiven, that we regain the dignity which we lost through sin and are restored to our original beauty.

This truth is highlighted by a unique painting done by Guercino. Most artists painting this parable focus on either the moment when the son returns to his father or the moment when the father embraces the son. Instead, Guercino decided to depict the moment when the son was being stripped of his soiled garments and handed new garments by his father. At first glance, this might seem like a strange moment to depict, but this action contains deep symbolic meaning.

As we heard in our second reading, “whoever is in Christ is a new creation.” At the moment when we repent of our sinfulness and return to our Father, we are created anew, re-created in the image of Christ. Think of the beautiful symbolism given to us in the baptismal rite for infants. After being brought up out of the water, they are dressed in a white garment and told, “You have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. With your family and friends to help you by word and example, bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven.”

At our baptism, we truly become a new creation and clothe ourselves in Christ. That is not the only time that this happens, however. Every single time that we turn away from sin and return to God with a contrite heart we are restored to that original dignity which we lost through sin. This is, of course, most especially true during the Sacrament of Penance when we press our faces to our Father’s loving breast and receive His mercy.

I find it striking that the baptismal rite makes reference to the fact that the community of the newly baptized is called to aid them on their Christian journey. When we become a child of God, we immediately enter into a relationship with all those who are also children of our Heavenly Father. Think back to the parable of the Prodigal Son. After the father restores the dignity which his son had lost, he throws a lavish banquet, restoring him to the community from which he had been estranged.

Yet, as we know, not everyone chose to come to the banquet. His brother refused to come in, saying that his younger brother was beyond redemption and should not be treated with such dignity. Instead, he should be cast back out into the wilderness like an animal. The father went out and pleaded with his older son, begging him to come in. “We must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.”

Luke never resolves the story and tells us whether the older son decides to return or not. We are left wondering if he removed himself from communion with his father over hatred towards his brother. Thus, the parable ends with a direct challenge to the Pharisees and scribes. Will they also withdraw themselves from communion with Christ out of a refusal to love their brothers, or will they see that their brothers have become a new creation and rejoice at their presence among them.

This parable leaves us many things to reflect on. Have we marred the beauty of our own souls through sin? Do we scorn and reject communion with those who we see as undeserving of our Father’s love? If the answer is yes to either of these questions, then we are invited to come back to our Father’s loving arms with contrite hearts so that we can be restored to unity... so that we can be cleansed and re-created, clothed with white garments washed in the blood of the Lamb.

In doing so, we are also restored to our community, to this Eucharistic assembly at which we are gathered together. Today’s parable reminds us that we must always strive to make sure that this place welcomes all who wish to be in fellowship with us regardless of their age or gender, their race or nationality, their orientation or persuasion... realizing that we have all been called to become a new creation and clothe ourselves in Christ. For it is only when we are joined together, united in love around this Eucharistic table, that we will be able to one day bring our baptismal dignity unstained into the everlasting life of Heaven.