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Annunciation Parish, Shumway, Illinois  
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The Fourth Sunday of Lent (C)

The two sons in the Gospel today share the very same problem: they are both lacking in love and they fail to see what it is that their father gives them.

The first son sees his father's love simply as something that is owed to him. He says: "Father give me the share of your estate that should come to me" (Luke 15:12), and off he goes. It requires no response from him whatsoever. The son thinks he is entitled to his father's love and in this way is more of a thief than a son. He accepts gifts but he loves not.

Even so, upon his return and his desire to confess his sins and his lack of love to and for his father, the father "caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). This father, of course, symbolizes Christ Jesus who runs to us, embraces and kisses us, as when we begin our journey home to him.

As we begin to ponder our own sins and the many ways that we have turned our backs on the Lord and forsaken him, Christ runs to us in his infinite love. Said the great Saint Ambrose:

Christ chooses those who stand. Rise and run to the church... He who hears you pondering in the secret places of the mind runs to you. When you are still far away, he sees

you and runs to you. He sees in your heart. He runs, perhaps someone may hinder, and he embraces you. His foreknowledge is in the running, his mercy in the embrace and the disposition of fatherly love. He falls on your neck to raise one prostrate and burdened with sins and bring back one turned aside to the early toward heaven. Christ falls on your neck to free your neck from the yoke of slavery and hang his sweet yoke upon your shoulders.<sup>1</sup>

When Christ comes running toward you as your thoughts slowly begin to turn to him, what will you do? Will run toward him and so embrace him as he embraces you? Will you stand utterly still, frightened of his mercy? Will you turn and walk away, refusing to be humbled by the tremendous gift of his love, though you deserve it not? How will you respond to his love?

The Lord has given to us the awesome gift of the Sacrament of Penance, of Confession, of Reconciliation, as the most wonderful way to return to him and to say, "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son" (Luke 15:19). As we confess to him he reaches out - through the hands of the priest - and raises us up even as he forgives our sins. As he does to the prodigal son, so he does to us in this great sacrament. When the penitent confesses his sins, God the Father

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Ambrose, *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* 7.229-30.

neither takes him in like a hired servant nor treats him like a stranger. Oh no, he kisses him as a son. He accepts him as a dead man come to life again. He counts him worthy of the divine feast and gives him the precious garment he once wore... Not only does he bring his son back from death, but also through the Spirit he clearly shows his grace. To replace corruption, he clothes him with an incorruptible robe. To satisfy hunger, he kills the fatted calf. The Father provides shoes so that he will not travel far away again. Most wonderful of all, he puts a divine signet ring on his hand. By all these things, he begets him anew in the image of the glory of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

This is why Holy Mother Church today invites us to "Laetare, Jerusalem! Rejoice, Jerusalem!"<sup>3</sup>

The second son thinks he earns his father's love by always doing the right thing. He says to his father: "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" (Luke 15:29). He is more of a servant than a son. He follows commands but he does not love.

Both of these sons sought food, nourishment, and sustenance. The younger son looked for his food among the slop

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<sup>2</sup> Saint Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 7.

<sup>3</sup> Introit, Fourth Sunday of Lent.

of the swine while the older looked for his food among the goats of his father's flocks. Neither of the sons recognized the true food present among them: the very love of their own father.

My brothers and sisters, the fattened calf who is slaughtered for us is Jesus Christ. "The calf was slain at this command of the Father, because the Christ ... could not be slain without the command of the Father."<sup>4</sup> Said Paul: "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" (II Corinthians 5:21).

Today, as on every Sunday - indeed, as at every celebration of the holy Mass - we celebrate the Passover of the Lord. For this reason the manna of the Israelites has ceased and we are offered instead the Bread of Angels, the Body and Blood of Christ (cf. Joshua 5:11). Here the Lord himself feeds us with the great Sacrament of Love, the Sacrament of Himself.<sup>5</sup>

As we come before him today, do we, like the younger son, think we are entitled to his love? He loves us, yes; but we are not entitled to his love. Do we, like the older son, think we must earn his love? It is true that we must keep his commandments, but we do so not so that he will love us but because we love him. Why must we remain so very hesitant to humbly accept his love, undeserving though we are?

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Chrysologus, *Sermon* 5.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*.

As Christ gives himself to us today, "there is singing and joy in the father's home. What happen[s] is the result of the Father's grace and loving kindness."<sup>6</sup>

Standing before you today, "we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (II Corinthians 5:!)! Let us run to the Lord - freely confessing our sins - and allow ourselves to be embraced and fed by him who loved us first (cf. I John 4:10).

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.