

- One of the nice things about the season of Lent is that each week our Gospel reading gives us a special message about how we can live better lives, how we can get to know God better.
- In the first week of lent we saw Jesus tempted by Satan in the desert. The message for us was we too will be tempted, but we don't have to give in if we resist sin and follow Jesus.
- In the second week we saw Jesus transformed on a mountain top and heard the voice of God tell those present (and us) "Listen to Him". The message for us: We too can change. Look more like Jesus – glow with his love in this world.
- Last week we heard how this change can start to take place for us: by repenting for our sins and using the gifts and talents God gives each of us to make life better ("bear fruit") for each other.
- In today's Gospel Jesus gives us a specific example of what that changed life, what bearing good fruit, looks like in action. Today Jesus speaks to us about Forgiveness.
- And forgiveness is tough business. As humans we struggle with it. We struggle asking for it and we struggle giving it.
- But Jesus couldn't be clearer in His teachings: Part of bearing "good fruit", part of leading a Christ-like life involves forgiveness.
- On this fourth Sunday of Lent our Gospel message is all about forgiveness: Asking for forgiveness and giving forgiveness.
- In our gospel Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, the religious leaders, who were criticizing Jesus for welcoming sinners and eating with them. The Pharisees were not used to asking for forgiveness (too blind to their own sins) nor giving forgiveness to others. So Jesus use a parable, the story of the Prodigal son, the story of three people, each one chosen to

tell the Pharisees and us something about forgiveness. Let's take a minute to see what each one has to say.

- Let's look first at the Prodigal Son, the one who took his share of the inheritance, left home, squandered it all away and was left in a dire situation.
- When we look at the prodigal son we see that sometimes you have to hit bottom, realize what you lost in order to see clearly.
- We see what it takes to **ask** for forgiveness. It's hard to do - many times pride and ego get in the way. It takes courage. We need to be honest with ourselves before we can be honest with others.
- You have to own up to the mistake or failure. Not let it be roadblock to being open to the idea of asking for forgiveness.
- You have to be prepared to accept the reactions of others including their criticisms. I'm sure the prodigal son wondered what his father's reaction would be when he asked him for forgiveness.
- But the son had to trust. Trust that there would be love and mercy in his father's heart. Think of how thrilled the son was when his father ran, embraced and kissed him. The prodigal son tells us asking for forgiveness takes courage and trust.
- Let's turn to the older brother. The one who withholds forgiveness. The one who is being judgmental - thinks he's better and deserves a reward for his good behavior.
- Jesus specifically places this brother into the story to show the danger in withholding forgiveness. How this type of attitude changes a person- creates someone who is jealous and angry and concerned only for their own self-interest.
- How having this attitude can change the lives of those around you- taking away the opportunities for joy and peace among families and friends.

- Jesus is telling the Pharisees, you have become that type of person.
- While it is hard to forgive when we know a person's faults, when they hurt us, let us down....Jesus makes it clear in this parable we have to get past that. [He is not saying we have to stay in abusive , hurtful relationships – Nowhere does Jesus say we need to be a punching bag – He is saying we need let go of the anger, the hatred and replace it with mercy - sometimes from a safe distance].
- While we learn important lessons about forgiveness from the two sons in this parable, I'd suggest the most important lesson about forgiveness, comes to us by looking at the Father in the story.
- Think about how this father's heart ached while his son was away. But he never gave up hope.....maybe today will be the day my child comes home. Jesus tells us God feels this way when we stray.
- Think for a moment about the possible actions this Father could have taken toward the prodigal son: Anger, revenge (certainly an option), cold indifference, and rejection? But instead look what he chooses: Love, mercy forgiveness.
- The Father in this parable teaches us not only the importance of giving forgiveness, he shows us how to forgive, shows us what forgiveness looks like. No anger, no gloating, no "I told you so". Those are replaced with "its ok", "I forgive you", "I love and care for you".
- Jesus tells us this is what God's forgiveness looks like and what our forgiveness must look like.
- Jesus uses the Father in this parable to give the Pharisees and us a glimpse into the very heart of God, our heavenly father.

- In this parable Jesus teaches us God is a Father who views each one of us as precious. Who is concerned when we stray from obedience to Him because He knows the danger and pain and loss that brings. God is a Father who forgives when we ask and wants us to be free of the guilt that comes with sin, wants us to live happy lives. [Do you know who most often doesn't forgive us? Ourselves. We hold on to guilt. If God our Father forgives us, we must forgive ourselves.]
- Look again at the father in the parable. How does he show forgiveness? He takes the initiative. He doesn't wait for the prodigal son to reach him. We are told the Father ran out to him and embraced him.
- God does this for us. He doesn't wait until we have changed completely. He isn't looking for perfection... He doesn't make us prove we are worthy. He just waits for us to take that step and ask. His love and mercy are so great there is no sin he won't forgive. He wants us to do the same for others, to take the initiative, to have the same heart, to imitate Him.
- And God knows being merciful and forgiving can be difficult to do on our own. The good news is we are not alone. Look at what the Father in the parable does for his other son, the angry jealous one. He goes out to him and lovingly says "Come on, don't be this way. Put your anger aside and choose love". That father walked along with his son to help him, to give him a lesson on forgiveness.
- We don't travel alone. God walks with us, in scripture, in the Holy Eucharist to teach us and give us the strength to forgive as we are forgiven.
- So today, in this season of Lent we look inward and with courage and trust, ask God for His forgiveness.
- But we also are asked to look outward for a moment. To ask the question: "Who is the prodigal son in our life?" Who

needs our forgiveness, our love? Is it a family member? Friend? Co-worker? Or maybe a stranger who needs some support or encouragement- a simple act of love.

- As St. Paul reminds us in our second reading “We are ambassadors for Christ” God counts on us to bring His message to the world (that’s what ambassadors do!!) and to **give the world an example of what real love and forgiveness, what God’s love and forgiveness looks like.**