

This Sunday's Readings – the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – The theme of today's readings is forgiveness.

As I have often said, unless we understand the culture of the ancient Middle Eastern peoples, we cannot truly understand the Holy Scriptures. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column emphasizes this while commenting on today's first and third readings – “Though every line of Scripture was written by Semitic thinkers, today almost everyone who reads and comments on this sacred collection are Greek thinkers. Among other things, that means we're "analyzing" words of "synthesizers." We Greek-minded individuals mentally tear things apart when we think of them. Semitic-minded people mentally pull things together. We passionately endeavor to eradicate contradictions; they just as passionately try to surface contradictions. Since the middle of the second Christian century, when Greek thinkers captured Christianity, we've lost an essential key for understanding our sacred writings. We continually search for "either/or" components in "both/and" literature. This is particularly true when we reflect on biblical concepts of God, especially as we find those concepts in today's first and third readings”.

The first reading is from the Book of Exodus, a Greek word meaning “departure”. Exodus is the second book of the Pentateuch (another Greek word meaning five books). The Pentateuch is the basis of the bible and to the Hebrews is known as the Torah. Even though the author of the Pentateuch is attributed to Moses, it was actually written sometime during the reign of King David, a couple of hundred years after Moses death. Still, that does not mean that it wasn't based on Moses' writings and/ or oral tradition. In today's first reading, we see Yahweh as a forgiving God and Moses as the perfect mediator. Moses has led the Israelites to the base of Mt. Sinai just a few months after their escape from Egypt. He then ascends the Mountain of God to converse with Yahweh for 40 days and 40 nights and receive the Ten Commandments. The Israelites become disgruntled, as usual, because Moses has been gone so long and so they force Aaron to construct the golden calf as an image of Yahweh. Remember, it was strictly forbidden to construct any image of Yahweh let alone worship it and offer sacrifices to it. It is this sin that inflames the wrath of Yahweh. As Yahweh says to Moses – “Let me alone, then, that my wrath may blaze up against them to consume them”. Moses then intervenes for the people by reminding Yahweh of the promises he made to the patriarchs. “So the Lord relented in the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people.” Fr. Roger Karban adds this cultural comment on the first reading – “We know from Deutero-Isaiah that you can take Yahweh's word to the bank. In chapter 55, God reminds us, “. . . My word that goes forth from my mouth . . . shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it." In this Exodus situation, that can only mean the Israelites shouldn't invest in any long-term life insurance. But, flying in the face of Deutero-Isaiah's theology, the Exodus author tells us Yahweh eventually "relented" in the punishment he had threatened to inflict on his people." No matter Moses' argument, how can Yahweh go back on Yahweh's word? Semitic thinkers have no problem with such a contradiction. They simply reply to our either/or objections with the comment, "On one hand, God must keep God's word. But on the other hand, God can change God's word."”

In today's Gospel reading from Luke, we read three parables (all of chapter 15) that illustrate God's forgiveness and joy when even one sinner repents and returns to God. The first Parable of the Lost Sheep is very similar to Matthew's account of the same parable (Matthew 18:12-14). The next two parables, the Parable of the Lost Coin and the Parable of the Lost Son, are unique only to Luke. The third Parable of the Lost Son needs the first two parables to make it truly meaningful. As Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains – "The twin parables emphasize the prevenient action of God in seeking and saving the lost, a thought that is then carried over into understanding the action of the father in the third parable: while the returning prodigal was still at a distance, his father "ran" and welcomed him home. Thus understood, all three parables are linked with the atonement, which, as we have seen, runs like a thread through all the readings of the day". Fr. Roger Karban adds this cultural comment on this Gospel reading – "Luke's Jesus creates a parallel contradiction when he teaches his enemies about God's forgiveness of sinners. On one hand, God is obligated to follow strict norms of justice. But on the other hand, God is unbelievably merciful. Such contradictory behavior surfaces in Jesus' parable about the prodigal father. Though obligated and expected to follow strict justice toward both sons, the father puts that obligation in the background when he finally encounters his long-lost prodigal son. As he explains to his justly complaining older son, "You are here with me always; everything I have is yours. But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." Perhaps the key to understanding these contradictions lies in a comment the great Hans Walter Wolff once made during a lecture on Jonah. There, too, Yahweh "repents" and, to the chagrin of the prophet, doesn't destroy the Ninevites. "Yahweh doesn't have to be faithful to Yahweh's word," the German scholar stated, "as long as Yahweh is faithful to Yahweh's people." Only a fool would keep his or her word when circumstances change enough to make that word "counter-productive." God's relationship with us is more important than God's reputation".

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* adds these comments on the Parable of the Lost Son – "A rabbinic tradition cautions: "Let not a person associate with sinners even to bring them near to the Torah" (*Mekilta* 57b on Exod 18:1). Feeding sinners is praiseworthy; eating with them is forbidden. "Hosting" or "welcoming" sinners, as Jesus does here (15:2), makes the Pharisees furious. Jesus routinely deals with opponents by insulting them plainly and directly. The central characters (shepherds and women) of the twin parables are deeply offensive to the Pharisees. . . . Jesus draws the Pharisees even closer with another double parable featuring a younger son (vv. 11-24) and an older son (25-32).

Sin. The younger son's request is equivalent to wishing his father were dead. By refusing to reconcile the younger son with father, the older son is equally remiss.

Repentance. Having squandered the inheritance, being reduced to tending unclean

animals, and beginning to starve, the younger son “came to himself,” that is, “began to repent.” He acknowledged that by losing the inheritance he lost the means for taking care of his father in old age. Opting to become a hired servant would preserve his independence and enable him to build up the funds he lost and repay his father. Repentance will bring reconciliation with his father, but probably not with his brother or with the village.

Grace. The father's behavior toward his returning son are dramatic deeds calculated to protect the boy from the anticipated hostility of the village. He runs the village gauntlet to meet the boy, wraps him in a protective hug, and kisses him again and again in a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Joy. Killing a calf rather than a goat or sheep means the entire community is invited to share in the joy. There is food enough here for more than a hundred people. The banquet is intended to reconcile the boy with the entire community.

Sonship. The father confirms the reestablished relationship: “This son of mine was dead and is alive again; was lost and is found.” This is more than the boy dreamed of. The elder son, too, is lost. He refuses to join in the feasting. Instead, he publicly humiliates his father by arguing with him in the presence of the entire village. He addresses his father with no title. He repudiates his sonship (“I have *slaved* for you!”). Amid his insults, the elder son insists, “I have never disobeyed you.” He accuses the father of favoritism (“him a calf; me not even a goat”). He slanders his brother by introducing into the story an unfounded charge of cavorting with harlots.

How does the father respond? Once again he treats an offending son with love tendered in humiliation. The father addresses the boy with a title, “Son,” and assures him that his share of inheritance is intact. In return for arrogance, the father offers compassion. The two sons in this parable are essentially the same and equally offensive. They differ only in their response to unexpected and undeserved love demonstrated by their humiliated father. Like these sons, all who hear this story must decide how they should respond to forgiving love”.

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team