

Homily for the Alton Deanery Men's Prayer Breakfast

**Saint Paul Catholic Church
Highland, Illinois**

**Saturday of the Second Week of Lent
March 3, 2018**

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Reverend Fathers, deacons, fellow Knights of Columbus, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: it is good to be with you for this Mass, followed by the Alton Deanery Men's Prayer Breakfast.

History is full of quarrelling families. One of the great founding myths of Europe is that of the city of Rome. More specifically in this story, it is two brothers who quarrel. Romulus and Remus are two abandoned children who are suckled by a she-wolf. As young men, they become leaders of their people and they decide to found a city. However, Romulus and Remus cannot agree on where to build, so each starts building his own city. Remus comes over to mock the site that Romulus has chosen, and, to insult his brother, jumps over the foundations of the walls. In ancient society, the city walls were sacred, and this was something like an act of blasphemy. Romulus kills Remus, and the city he founds goes on to

become known as Rome. So, right at the beginning of one of the greatest civilizations the earth has ever seen, are the poisonous passions of envy, resentment and violence. This seems all the more shocking given that the people involved are siblings.

However, many centuries later, the Roman Emperor would make Christianity the “official” religion of the Roman Empire. The true religion based on self-sacrifice and resisting violence, through the providence of God, came to atone for the violence of the founding of the earthly city.

The Roman story has echoes in our own sacred scriptures. If the legend of Romulus and Remus is the story of the foundation of a single civilization, Cain and Abel is the story, along with Adam and Eve, of the foundation of the whole of human society. After the catastrophe of the fall, the next event in the human race is fratricide – brought about through envy, resentment and shocking violence.

Jesus is more aware than anyone of the damage done by original sin and how this damage can affect families. Our Gospel today contains one of the most well-known parables that deals with this topic, that of the Prodigal Son. One of the brothers in today’s parable is greedy, selfish and

entirely wrapped up in himself. He does not wish to share the life of his father. Later, the older brother shows himself to be resentful, jealous and full of anger. He cannot, or will not, share the joy of his father.

The parable is about God's response to all of this. It is not to condemn, but to forgive. The father in the story begins to run to greet the lost son "while he was still a long way off." The father takes the initiative.

Referring to this passage of scripture as the Parable of the Prodigal Son is quite appropriate, since the word "prodigal" means to waste, and indeed the younger son in the parable has wasted his inheritance. Similarly, it is our own sins that alienate us from God and from each other. Like the younger brother of the parable, we come to realize that it is our sins that keep us away from the Father, and the Father never rejects us. Further, the reconciliation of the prodigal son in the story is the symbol of our own resurrection, both spiritual and physical.

The younger son is indeed prodigal - wasteful and dissolute. He has forgotten his father, his family and even his faith as he is reduced to working as a swineherd - something no faithful Jew would consider. It is there, at his lowest ebb, that he "comes to his senses": he remembers, and the key thing

he remembers is his father – his father’s house, his father’s goodness, his father’s love. It proves to be a saving memory for the boy as he returns home to seek his father’s forgiveness. But it is in fact the Father who proves to be prodigal – in the sense of extravagant – running out to meet his son, embracing him and restoring his dignity in the symbols of the ring, the robe and the sandals.

The twist is that Jesus told this story to the scribes and Pharisees who were grumbling that Jesus was mixing with tax collectors and sinners and eating with them. They are represented in the figure of the elder son who cannot countenance forgiving the younger son. He can only remember the wrongs his brother has committed, and so he is unable to forgive.

We are invited to bring resolution to this unfinished story. It is unfinished because we do not know what the elder son did next. The father stands outside the house pleading with him to enter and join the celebration. As the scene fades out, we are left wondering what the elder son will do, and more importantly: what will I do? Jesus poses this startling challenge to us: will you embrace the way of forgiveness in your own life, and so join the

celebration of God's mercy, or do you prefer to stay outside, clinging to your memory of hurts, anger and offences?

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this parable cannot simply be for us a nice story that we hear in our readings. Quite the contrary, we must take to heart the message of the parable. In our society today, we do not have to look far to see people living lavish, self-centered lives - the very same sort of life that was led by the younger son in our gospel today. Just as the younger son demanded his inheritance and rejected his relationship with his father, so too do many people today live in a way that seeks their own gain over a relationship with God.

In an age where more and more people, particularly young people, say that they have no religious affiliation or even claim to be "atheists," we are called to commit ourselves daily to living as Christ's disciples so that our example of what it means to be a follower of Jesus might be an inspiration to those around us. Our task as missionary disciples is to invite our family, our friends, and our neighbors to share what we have: a relationship with our Lord.

As we continue our Lenten journey, the Church invites us to examine our lives and to recognize the ways that we, like the prodigal son, have fallen victim to the trappings of the world around us or a self-centered mentality. My dear brothers in Christ, it is my hope that, if you have fallen into sin, you will use this time of Lent, like the prodigal son, to make your “journey home” to the Father, who waits patiently for your return. Just as the father in the parable waited for the return of the prodigal son, so too does God wait with open arms for the sinner who sincerely wishes to repent and live in the light of His love.

May God give us this grace. Amen.