

**Pastoral Sermon by Father Timothy Baclig**  
**The Sunday of the Prodigal Son**  
**February 24, 2018**

In the February 2017 issue of The Word magazine helps us to understand the challenge that we have today as a church. Bishop JOHN begins his editorial with the following statement: *Social scientists have been telling us that people are more interested in being spiritual, and less and less interested in following organized religion. Many want to have a relationship with God, but on their own terms. They want lots of nice feelings, assurance of some kind of salvation and a comfort in an enlightenment that they can control. In such a system, everyone chooses how to be spiritual and makes up the rules.*

Bishop JOHN's editorial comments is an introduction to how we have had to re-think our approach in reaching others. If we are to ask ourselves: Why is it that many are turned off by church as an institution? We could even ask ourselves: What comes to mind when you think of the word, "institution?" A well established organization; something that expects conformity! Aha! "Conformity."

Just think about the prodigal son in today's lesson. As a young man he was obviously stressed out! He was boxed in and I guess, considered himself suffocating. He felt compelled to leave home.

The difference of the lesson our Lord presented to the listeners in His day, and the situation of our lives today is: First, if a young person is raised in a Christian home (where there are the foundational aspects of Christian morals and discipline along with the necessary experience of love), and then takes the bold step that the prodigal son did, thinking that he could "do things on his own;" he would be guided by a conscience. However, we know from the circumstances of our day that every home does not provide the formative values of Christian homes. Consequently, there are many more young and old who have left home and have not experienced the foundational aspects of morals and discipline that cause one to have a conscience. They are like ships that have set sail, with no compass for direction, allowing the current to take them further away from their home port, with no sense of where they will arrive, and in some cases, having no means of returning back home.

**Today as we approach the season of the Great Fast: Are we the prodigal spoken of in today's Gospel: anxious to get what we consider we rightly deserve for ourselves so we can do what we want? Or are we like the older son in the parable, who resented the fact that his brother was able**

to do what he wanted with his inheritance at a young age, frustrated in continuing doing his chores; claiming that he was not properly compensated or even acknowledged?

In the last three weeks we have been hearing lessons that prepare us for the season of Great Lent. A preparation that begins even before we are called upon to start fasting or focusing our attention upon doing good works. This past week there was no fasting in the church. Some would think that, like a *mardi gras* the church permits and even allows us to engage in “riotous living;” you know, giving us a chance to “get it all out of our system,” to “eat, drink, and be merry” before the time of the Fast.

Now let me ask you this question: Is there such a thing as “being on vacation from the Christian life?” There certainly is: being a Christian on a vacation, but “taking a vacation from being a Christian?” No. You and I have to “have it together” and be truly content and honest with God in our life.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son in today’s Gospel lesson presents us with the image of a young man who in his quest for independence, having received his inheritance, ventured on his own and squandered his possessions in “loose living.” The irony is that the real joy in feasting, the real celebration is revealed at the end of the parable when the young man returns home!

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a lesson of God—our Father’s unconditional steadfast love for us! It is a lesson that is based upon what we have been focusing upon with our young people and are paying much attention to: namely, our relationships and the choices we have in building good and healthy relationships that enable us to thrive; beginning with our relationship to God. Today, some will hear this parable and ask some very legitimate questions. One is: why are there no women in the story? The question, however, should not limit our capacity to perceive and learn a lesson that could easily apply to a single mom, or to daughters as well. I think the lesson is even more powerful we we consider the behavior of these men in the context of a patriarchal society and what we discover to be even unthinkable and highly improbable!

And as difficult as it may be for you and I to understand the fact is: We would learn nothing and gain no full understanding of the parable’s meaning if there was no freedom; if there was no opportunity for the young man in his foolish desire to fail. We would also learn nothing and gain no full understanding of the lesson of the parable if there was no thought of

**what it means for a parent to let go! “Having control,” having the capacity to “be in charge,” may sound like a very Godly attribute. You and I know very well, if we have the courage to admit it, that our capacity to “be in charge” and to “be in control” is not absolute! We don’t! God does! How then can we understand or begin to comprehend what it means for God to “let go?” Think about it! He who is ultimately the judge; He who is the Creator of all things (visible and invisible) giving us the freedom to do as we please! Wow!**

**Yet, this is the essence of today’s lesson! It is a teaching that deeply confounded our Lord’s listeners. Why?**

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is a lesson, which in the days of Jesus, that could’ve easily made his hearers laugh. What you and I today would consider a beautiful story, when examined more closely conveys a very profound message. There are three things that would never have taken place in the context of 1st century Palestine (and perhaps in the homes of many traditional families. 1) A son (a younger son) would never have received his father’s inheritance and wandered off into a life of riotous living; 2) a father would not be anxiously waiting for his son’s return; see him from a distance and run out to meet him; then 3) beg his eldest son to join him in celebrating the return of his lost brother.

Sadly, we live in a world today with thousands of homeless young people, not all of which chose to be without a home. Many today suffer from what are called “dysfunctional families” and have become dependent upon the resources of others. In other words, the conventional family, as we hear in today’s lesson may not be the context of many young people today. In fact, for some, a prodigal son (or daughter) may be returning home (if they do) with someone else with them, if not a child of their own. Young people today may also be retuning home with tremendous emotional if not physical scars from having experienced trauma or a personal crisis. There are also many adult children still living under the roof of their parents, who are very secure as dependent adults, many without jobs, who have no thought of leaving home. Then there are prodigal parents: fathers, mothers, spouses, who have left their families, or who may have been caught by some snare outside of their home. People who have found themselves living double lives; resulting in a growing phenomenon of our day: “being a single parent.”

You and I also know very well how many in our country have returned home from repeated deployments for two wars over the past decade; some very much like prodigals from their own marriages, whose lives have been deeply

scared by the condition and horrors of war in a foreign land, often described as a world of the dark ages.

So then, who today is a prodigal? Who today runs away? And if going away from family, friends, wife, husband, country, is a choice, who today returns? How do they return? With whom today do they return? What do they return to? Or do they even return at all?

Many who are not even Orthodox don't even need to have a teaching about confession or even require an explanation about their need to confess! Speak to any social worker in our parish or anyone who works as a professional counselor, and you will quickly realize how we as a church need to understand our mission: not only as priests who are professionally trained in seminary or continuing education seminars, but as Christian parents, Christian stewards, or better yet, servants of Christ, who are called to minister in providing hope, if not shelter, but also to teach; and most importantly to love as our heavenly Father loves us.

**The parable of the prodigal son in today's Gospel therefore is a lesson that helps us to envision what we as believers in a loving and merciful God are called to do; for whom and for what: Build a church? Yes. Have fundraisers? Yes. Be part of a fellowship? Yes. However, discovering that being at home is being in our Father's house where *we* prodigals return home again and again.**

You and I are here today (in church) because someone was a good model and example. Whether they are alive or have passed on from this life, that person, or persons, prayed for us; and could very possibly be praying for us even now. You and I are part of this community and have been called to be a part of this parish for a reason: We have a mission and a purpose; not by the design by Father Timothy or our Parish Council. Our mission, vision and purpose is doing our Father's business; acting and behaving, serving and sharing as the inheritors and as wise and faithful stewards of our Father's Kingdom whose resources are in fact beyond what we perceive or understand them to be.

It is time for you and I to examine ourselves more closely, especially as we approach the season of the Great Fast. Are we the prodigal spoken of in today's Gospel: anxious to get what we consider we rightly deserve for ourselves so we can do what we want? Or are we like the older son in the parable, who resent the fact that our brother can do what he "jolly well pleases..." with our Father's wealth, while you and I have to go about doing our regular chores and never get properly compensated, or even acknowledged?]

**Our Church always provides for us a full picture of the truth. That is the reason why the religious art in our church frequently looks absurd and somewhat distorted to the natural eye. While the lessons of the church may be the same in their content, there can always be something to gain in deepening our understanding in every stage of our life. You've often heard me say: the lessons we learn at the age of 60 may not be the lessons learned at 20 or 30. That is also because the lessons to be learned at 50 or 60 cannot be learned at 20 or 30. Then there is being 70 or 80.**

**There is no learning (or even growing up) if you and I will only consider things from a fixed perspective. We should guard ourselves from fixed perspectives; myopic thinking. Such "perspectives" and ways of thinking can stagnate, debilitate and paralyze us spiritually.**

**Through the centuries the Church did not provide for us certain disciplines (like Great Lent) for no reason. It is rooted in God's truths: wisdom that is based upon knowing a great deal about human behavior, common sense, good reason. Its answer for a world in darkness and chaos is: a God of great mercy and compassion illustrated in today's parable.**

**However next Sunday, in the third lesson of our Pre-Lenten season, we will be presented with a very sobering image: The "The Last (and Final) Judgment". Something else that you and I don't often give much thought to: a lesson that helps us to recognize that while our God is the God of love (and love is not God); love is also not permissive. Our freedom and blessing to have choices requires our personal responsibility. But a responsibility that also compels us to act and behave in ways that are an aid to us in encountering and knowing our Lord Jesus Christ and gaining salvation.**

### **Prayer**

O Christ our God, assist us with pray with divine wisdom and strength, that we may be found as sons and daughters of our Father's house, doing Thy will on earth as it is in heaven. Inspire us by Your truth and strengthen us in our repentance, that we may be found with all that you have provided to us, faithful stewards and members of Thy Kingdom. For blessed is Thy Name and glorified is Thy Kingdom: of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; now and ever and unto ages of ages. A-men.