

Sunday, September 15, 2019

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Laura M. Leming, FMI

Annunciation FMI Community and member of Micah Theotokos

Today's Gospel is usually referred to as "the prodigal son". But the other readings as well as the introduction to the Gospel point out that the real focus is "the prodigal father". And I think that's a particularly good message for us in the world we are navigating today. It's way too easy to be like the elder brother, who is caught up in resentment for his sibling and angry with his father for not getting special treatment – when he has done everything by the dutiful son playbook.



Encountering this story in the past, my focus was on the younger son's approach to seeking forgiveness. Notice when he finds himself in a dreadful condition – a Jewish man wanting to eat pig food! (think about it) - he plans out how he will approach his father and even rehearses his lines. But the prodigal father, the one who is extravagant and lavish in his loving, doesn't even let him finish what he rehearsed. There's the point, extravagant love, presented to us also in the first reading from Exodus. This is actually a little humorous. Moses – who has complained to God all along about having to deal with this

“stiff-necked people” – is the one that reminds God to be God and to remember the love and mercy promised to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. And God does.

Paul, who addresses Timothy, earlier, as his own child, and here, as beloved, is so grateful for the love God has shown him. He says twice that he “was mercifully treated” despite knowing in his heart of hearts that he's unworthy. This is all God, not Paul. That's where the elder brother gets caught up, feeling like he deserves special treatment because he's done all things right. There's no room for mercy.

In our world today, there are so many people taking this elder brother attitude toward migrants and asylum seekers. Commentaries are filled with “they're not playing by the rules” – despite the obvious facts that we keep changing the rules on how people can even apply for entry – to the United States – but also to Germany, Italy, Greece or a host of other countries that are looking to secure their borders. In the beginning of the Gospel, Luke makes a special point to note that the tax collectors and the sinners are the ones listening. The ones who know they need mercy. Jesus begins with two other examples of extravagance – the man who searches for the lost sheep and the woman searching for the lost coin. This was risky behavior for both of them – the 99 might wander off, and the woman ended up paying a lot more for the party she gave than the lost coin was worth. But they “got” the goodness of God and knew the importance of celebrating that the lost were found. Like them, we are invited to extravagant love!