

Sermon Preached on
Fourth Sunday in Lent
(March 6, 2016)
"THIS!"

One of my cousin's shares a lot of articles and photographs on Facebook, and when she gets excited about something or really agrees with it, she often writes a one-word comment. She writes: "THIS!" In all capital letters.

The moment I began reading today's gospel, a little sign popped in my mind that read: "THIS!" (All capital letters). The reason is that this is my favorite parable of all time.

A parable, as you may know, is a comparison. It's putting into story form what God is like or what the kingdom of heaven is like. Sometimes they are a little tough to figure out like last week's - you remember, with the tree that the farmer wanted to chop down because it didn't produce fruit?

But I get this one. What it tells me about God is that, well, God doesn't make any sense and maybe isn't fair.

Let's review.

Here's a dad with two sons. The older is hardworking and obedient. The younger is a spoiled brat. He's rude to his father, lazy, and irresponsible. As youngest son, he has no right to an inheritance, but he knows Dad's going to give him a share anyway. Only, he decides he doesn't want to wait for Dad to die, so he says, "Give it to me now!"

Then he goes and blows it on pretty much everything a parent would NOT want their child to spend money on. He does this with abandon, and before long, predictably, he's in the gutter, and left to find whatever job he can - in this case caring for pigs' which is as low as it gets if you're Jewish.

When he come to his senses - because he's hungry, not because he misses his family - he heads home with a memorized speech. But before he gets a single word out, the dad sees him, and rushes down to hug and kiss him as if he had just done the family some great honor. It's like the dad has no pride, no self-respect, no sense of justice.

To make things worse, the older son who does everything right is still out in the fields working when the party starts - and he is furious because he feels like the spoiled kid has been rewarded for bad behavior while he never gets anything.

Before we go any further with this story, let me ask, can you think of any modern equivalents? You could probably think of small examples in your own life, but I'll just pull a couple from the news. In several prisons, there are university programs. If an inmate works at it, they can get a college degree.

These programs come under a lot of fire - not because they don't work. They do!

Inmates who earn degrees in prison generally stay out of prison when they are released. They become contributing members of society rather than threats. These programs save countless dollars and lives. They come under fire by people who feel the inmates don't deserve an education, let alone a "free" education. I actually heard someone say, "Must be nice to be in prison. You get free room and board and college."

As the parent of two college students, I get whole free college tuition frustration. But most who complain aren't mad because college is too expensive. They're mad because they say it isn't fair.

We play by the rules but have to pay and go into debt. And they...well, they should be eternally punished. In other words, we often feel like the older brother: we play by the rules, and someone who doesn't gets the goodies.

For the record, I do not recommend prison as a path to an education. It is a lot worse than sitting among the pigs.

But you get the point. Or look at our immigration policy. How often have we heard - or said ourselves - "These illegals come to our country and take our jobs and send their kids to our schools... they don't deserve it, and we're just rewarding their illegal behavior."

Or just the other day, the city of Ithaca was in the news because the mayor is trying to open a safe injection center for heroin addicts where they can have clean needles and a place to stay safe while they are high, and trained medical staff to care for them in case of overdose.

There are examples where these programs work, reducing not only accidental heroin deaths but also the crime rate. And over time, the addiction rate has been shown to fall because more addicts get into treatment. But there is resistance because some consider it to be rewarding bad behavior.

That brings us back to the older son who was so mad that the younger son was getting a party. THIS is what I love about this parable. The dad says, "You've always been with me! You and I have always shared our love. But THIS brother of yours - he didn't know it till now. FINALLY he is alive, and it's time to celebrate his rebirth."

You see, it never was about deserving. This parable isn't about THEM. It's about God. It's all about God's unreasonable love for us.

BUT, when Jesus tells this parable, he IS suggesting that we adopt that same unreasonable love especially for those who are on the edges of society. Those who don't deserve yet another chance. Those haven't even said "I'm sorry."

This is my favorite parable because it tells me who God is, and it tells me who I am. Whether I'm the responsible older son or the irresponsible brat, it tells me that I am still and always will be a beloved child of God. Amen.