

Today we hear one of the most well-known parables not only in the bible, but in all of Western literature. Many consider it Jesus' greatest parable and one of the greatest stories ever told. I will provide just a few brief remarks on it this morning. Pope emeritus Benedict said that it each time we hear it, it can suggest ever-new meanings (Angelus, 2010).

First, right at the beginning, we see the Father's generosity in that he consents to his son's request. The son insults his father by asking for his share of the inheritance. This would be akin to saying, "Dad, why don't you just drop dead so I can get on with my life with the inheritance that's coming to me." Yet, the father respects his son's freedom, gives him his share, and lets him go his way.

We then hear that the son collects everything and travels to a distant country. The Greek is *charan makra*, a big empty space. It's a place where there are no rules and no boundaries. It's a place free from authority, law, and the Commandments. In this place, the son can live in "complete freedom," scooping the most out of life.

We then hear the consequences of this way of living. The money runs dry and he hires himself out to the local citizens where he feeds pigs, an abomination for the Jews. He dissolute lifestyle has landed him "in the mud" so to speak. Ironically, he has been a slave to his passions all along, and now his physical state is commensurate with that slavery.

Eventually, the son wakes up to what Benedict calls the "truth of his existence" – he's not a slave, but a son. True freedom is not "freedom from," but rather "freedom for" – the freedom for sonship – the freedom *to be* a son. Thus, we hear about his return and his father who seeks him, and embraces him.

Bishop Barron points out that it would have been humiliating for the father as an old man to run to his son. The father is willing, however, to be humiliated before his son who humiliated him. In other words, in addition to the father's generosity, now we also see his compassion, mercy, and forgiveness.

The father then gives his prodigal son the finest robe, a ring, and sandals. Pope Benedict points out that symbolically, humanity lost its first "robe" in the fall. But now, this "robe of grace" is given back him. The ring symbolizes the new relationship between the two, much like a wedding ring.

And what about the fattened calf? It symbolizes the paschal Lamb, Christ, who has been sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7). The feast, of course, is the festive Eucharist, which anticipates the eternal banquet of heaven.

Only Jesus in His wisdom can encapsulate the beauty of God's merciful love and our condition in such a short parable. Again and again, we must experience God's love by throwing ourselves into His arms. And doing so, may we have the courage to become like the Father in welcoming home his children who have left him that they, too, may experience his merciful love.