Learning mercy from a father's heart

by Fr. Tom Forrest, CSsR

Part of a series of articles based on Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *As the Third Millennium Draws Near.*

Like most boys, I enjoyed telling others about my dad. He was the one who taught me how to play ball and took me to see *Lost Horizon*, one of the most memorable films of my youth.

I recall my mom saying to him again and again, "Tom, can you fix this?" And he always could, whether it was the toaster, the vacuum cleaner, or whatever. It was from him that I received my love of tools and joy in fixing things.

One of my favorite childhood memories is of the day we were walking home from the movies and I said in boyish pride, "Pop, I'll race you to the corner." We both took off. I was feeling confident as we ran neck and neck, but as the corner came closer, my father decided that it was time to switch gears. He suddenly surged away from me in what seemed like a blinding flash.

Whenever one of my brothers or I got a bit out of line, my mother would simply say, "Keep it up and I'll have to tell your father when he gets home." We never found out what would have happened if she told him, because that little warning was all it took to get us back in line.

That was my dad, strong and capable. I still feel proud of him as I tell the stories and enjoy the memories.

Jesus in His humanity was a Son not unlike the rest of us. Imagine His joy in having a Father who created the Universe and whose whole character could be described with the beautiful word "love" (see 1 Jn 4:8)! Though we can never think of Jesus as proud, He was certainly pleased at having such a Father and took great delight in revealing Him to us (see Mt 11:27). The goal of His life on earth was to transform each of us by adoption into a child of that very same Father. If I take pleasure in talking about my dad who could fix the toaster and run like the wind, what was the joy of Christ in telling us about His Father, who is so incomparable that for Him "all things are possible" (see Mk 14:36)?

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Revealing that Father to us was so delightful and so important to Jesus that He takes pains to paint for us in the Parable of the Prodigal Son a spectacular word picture of the Father's merciful heart. At the same time that the story unveils the heart of the Father, it gives us a pointed model of how quickly we must seek reconciliation with others.

"A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of your estate.' The younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance. Coming to his senses he thought, 'Here am I, dying from hunger.' So he got up and went back to his father.

"While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him, ordering his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began" (see Lk 15:11-32 for complete text).

Because all of us have sinned and been sinned against, this story contains a badly needed double lesson. Millions suffer lifelong wounds, either because they sinned against others and have never been forgiven, or because they were hurt by the sin of someone else and have never shown forgiveness.

Either way, the lack of reconciliation is the reason for the wars and conflicts, the divorces and broken homes, acts of vengeance, and feelings of resentment and guilt that destroy our peace and damage our oneness with God and each other. That's why we see the father in the parable *rushing* to be reunited with his wayward son and then urging his other son to do the same.

In the context of telling us that we prove ourselves children of the heavenly Father by loving our enemies and praying for those who treat us badly, Jesus commands us to be nothing less than "perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (see Mt 5:43-48)!

Isn't it amazing that He demands perfection of us in our willingness to forgive and work for reconciliation, even though these are the areas in which even the most devout among us habitually move the slowest? It could be that Jesus demands so much in this regard because He knows that our emotional health depends upon believing that our merciful Father has forgiven all the harmful things we have done, and our peace and joy depend on learning from that Father how to forgive and seek reconciliation.

Pope John Paul II has set aside 1999 for learning these healing truths. "The whole of the Christian life is like a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, whose unconditional love for every human creature, and in particular for the 'prodigal son,' we discover anew each day" (TMA, #49).

As soon as we turn toward the Father with true contrition, our sins are gone, and once forgiven, they become the only thing God ever forgets (see Jer 31:34). "Treading underfoot our guilt, You cast into the depths of the sea all our sins" (Micah 7:19).

> ***"We see the father in the parable rushing to be reunited with his wayward son."***

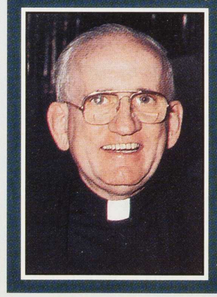
By picturing for us the speed and joy with which the father of the prodigal son rushes to forgive him, Jesus gives us an inspiring example of what we, in turn, must do to stay united and at peace with ourselves and with each other.

I loved my own father so much that I never wanted him coming home to hear from my mom that I had misbehaved. Who among us would want our Elder Brother, Jesus, telling the heavenly Father that we were never convinced of His forgiveness and continue to harbor resentments because we failed to learn from the parable of His infinite mercy?

That possibility should lead us to make a good confession, and in that way experience the Father's mercy as He lifts the sins from our back and rushes to embrace us and express His joy at our return. It should also lead us to actively seek reconciliation with all our brothers and sisters by speaking to them words of repentance, forgiveness, and love.

By going to confession, we admit that we, too, are prodigal children in need of fatherly forgiveness. By forgiving each other, we show that we have learned the lesson offered to the elder son, so comfortable in his righteousness yet so sadly unlike his father. *Dearest Jesus, reveal the Father to us, so we, too, can return home and live together in mercy, joy, and love.* ✝

Fr. Tom Forrest, CSsR, is Director of EVANGELIZATION 2000, a preparatory effort for the Great Jubilee Year 2000.



Fr. Forrest spent 23 years in the Caribbean serving as a missionary. He also worked in Rome for 10 years where, among other duties, he directed Worldwide Retreats for Priests. He resides in Washington, D.C.

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