Opinion
Spirituality



"The Return of the Prodigal Son" (1909) by Jean-Louis Forain (National Gallery of Art)



by Thomas Gumbleton

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You may recall, if you were here last week at this Mass, that in our reflection about the Scriptures of last Sunday, I connected it with a passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah, talking about how extraordinary is the love of God for us. The passage speaks about a time when the chosen people had gone against God's will, had gone to war, even though the prophet had warned them. It was a disaster. They

did it anyway and they were crushed.

But then Isaiah has the beautiful words: "God is always waiting to be gracious to you." That in spite of the fact that they had totally disobeyed God, gone against God's will, entered into a war with violence and killing, hatred, God is waiting to be gracious to us. That's such a beautiful thought that we should cherish and hold on to. God is always waiting to be gracious to us. If we sin, we turn to God and God is there to forgive. That seems like infinite love, doesn't it?

Yet, today's passage of the Gospel shows us even more extraordinary love. In this passage of the Gospel, the story that we've heard so many times and have reflected on before about the so-called prodigal son, the father, who in the story, of course, is God, isn't just waiting. He has been waiting every day, but when he sees the son, he runs out. He can't wait to forgive, to reconcile and to welcome that sinful son home.

That's how God is towards us. God is not always just waiting to be gracious to us; God is looking out for us. God is running toward us to draw us in.

Earlier this week, if you follow the *Little Black Book* (which I've noticed are in the back of the church and some of you may be using that for your daily prayer during Lent), this past week on March 27, there was a part about the person who wrote the book, Bishop Ken Untener.

It reminds us that on March 27 this past week was the 15th anniversary of his death. Ken was a priest of the Archdiocese of Detroit, became the bishop of Saginaw [Michigan], and died at a young age. But he had left so many Scripture reflections behind that people have been putting out these Little Books (as they're called) for 15 years.

Fourth Sunday of Lent — Year C readings

March 31, 2019

Joshua 5:9a, 10-12

Psalm 34

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

On Wednesday, the 27th, they put in a small piece about Ken. Here's something he said: "Keep this in mind: Religion is more about God loving us than us loving God, or loving others, or loving ourselves."

He goes on, "The first thing we have to catch is that God loves us, now, as we are."

We always say I've got to do this or that or something else to make myself loved by God, but God never stops loving us. That's what Ken is saying. The first thing we have to catch is that God loves us now at this very instant as we are. God will never stop loving us.

"Before doing anything else, we need simply to let ourselves be on the receiving end of the goodness and love of God." We don't have to work to earn God's love. We don't have to do all kinds of special penances, say extraordinary prayers of some sort, or have mystical experiences. God is always loving us. That's a truth that we need to try to let sink deeply into our awareness. We don't earn the love of God; we can't merit the love of God; it is a gift.

Last Sunday, again, when God was revealed to Moses in that burning bush mystical experience, Moses wants to know, "How do I name you?" because God is sending him to the people in Egypt in slavery. God says in response, "I am who I am." Now think about what that means. In John's first letter, John says, "God is love. Where there is love, there is God. ... Not that we loved God, but that God first loved us." That's the very essence of God: I am who I am. It's love. God is always loving us. Once we really let that awareness deepen within our hearts and in our consciousness, it makes everything different in our relationship to God.

I had an experience once where that became amazingly clear to me. It was an accident that happened on the Lodge Freeway. This was many years ago. I was driving north on the Lodge Freeway to exit at Southfield.

At some point, I began to have the sense that the steering wheel was out of control. I couldn't hold it steady. I was on the lane next to the median. Everybody's traveling 60 — now it would be 70 or 80 miles an hour, but back then it was about 60 miles an hour. I went across two lanes without hitting a car, and up an embankment. Along that freeway, there are a lot of concrete walls, but it was a grass embankment.

The car went up, flipped over, and rolled down. I ended up upside down in the car. Thank God, I had a seatbelt on and I was suspended.

The one not very smart thing I did after I realized I was OK: I opened the window and was going to crawl out. So I pushed the button for the seatbelt and of course I fell on my face. The only injury I got was a slight cut over my eye.

Finally, the police came. They took me out and made me go to the hospital to get checked out. But everything was fine and I managed to get a ride home.

Here's the amazing thing from my experience: The next morning (it was a beautiful day in September), I was working at the archdiocese at the time, and I'd driven downtown, parked my car, and was walking across the street in the morning and it was just a gorgeous day. All of a sudden, it hit me like it had not the night before: I'm alive, what a gift.

Now I'm not suggesting that God was doing something extraordinary to protect me from those other cars or whatever. But it just made me more aware than ever I had been in my life that my very existence, my life, is a gift from God. God is always giving me that gift and will for all eternity.

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That's what it means: God first loves us. Once I became aware of that in that deep way, it made a lot of difference in my life, and I hope continues to do that. But it was a marvelous gift to realize so deeply and profoundly how God first loves us and never stops loving us, and that will be forever.

That's what this parable brings out. God loved that son, never stopped loving that son, and will love that son forever. That's true of each one of us.

So here are Bishop Ken's words again. Carry them home with you. "Keep this in mind: religion is more about God loving us than us loving God, or loving others, or loving ourselves."

The first thing we have to do is catch or get that concept that God loves us now as we are. Before doing anything else, we simply need to let ourselves be on the receiving end of the goodness of God. Think about that this week and watch the

change that takes over in your heart.

Editor's note: *This homily was given March 31 at St. Ambrose Church in Grosse Pointe, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*