

The Religious Ed teacher was reading this story of the Prodigal Son to his class, clearly emphasizing the resentment the older brother expressed at the return of his brother. When he was finished telling the story, he asked the class, "Now who was really sad that the prodigal son had come home?" After a few minutes of silence, one little boy raised his hand and confidently stated, "The fatted calf."

This is a great parable for Lent! It is commonly called the "parable of the prodigal son." But it could just as well be called the "parable of the older brother" or the "parable of the forgiving father." Each of these persons in the story speaks to us in different, but equally powerful, ways. They mark out three paths to Easter life.

1.First, there is the prodigal, or wasteful, son who demands his inheritance, goes off to a distant country and loses it all. This unnamed "distant country" is more than a place. It is really a way of living, a condition of the heart. Maybe we have known the "distant country" where we leave behind Church and Gospel to follow our own way.

We are lured to a place where "sin" is made to look like fun. But sin isn't fun for long. Sin is fun until a person becomes addicted to drugs. Sin is fun until drinking harms or hurts another or ourselves. Sin is fun until infidelity destroys a marriage and a family.

Sin is fun until greed, arrogance or deception distort and bend our life out of shape and leave us isolated from God and from others, morally ruined. This is the "distant country" we all have known in some way.

When the prodigal son comes to his senses, we have the moment of recognition: "I have sinned." It is the moment when he no longer blamed his father for being too indulgent, when he no longer blamed society for being too immoral, when he no longer blamed his employer for being unfair, when he no longer blamed his own immaturity for being unwise, when he no longer blamed his genetic makeup or birth order for making him rebellious.

"I have sinned!" That moment is the key to a different future for him and the key to the rest of his life. How often we remain trapped in destructive, sinful patterns of living, ready to blame anyone and anything else. It is a grace to be able to say, and mean, "I have sinned."

It is the child in us who is always blaming someone else, parents, family, pastor, the Church, teachers, public scandals, an immoral society or the media. The refrains are familiar. "He made me do it. She pushed me. Everyone's doing it. I couldn't help myself. You should have done more for me. I didn't have good parents."

+And, of course, it all started with Adam and Eve. Adam: "The woman who you put with me- she gave me fruit from the tree, and so I ate." Eve in turn blamed the serpent for tricking her.

It is a sign of moral awakening and spiritual maturity to be able to say, "I have sinned." The path to Easter for the prodigal son and for us lies in the crucial importance of being able to say, "I have sinned."

2. There is a second path for us, the path of the older brother. Where in this path we sometimes feel that people who repent shouldn't just be able to come back so easily. They should suffer somehow. They should agonize, be humiliated, know pain, pay for what they have done and earn their return.

They don't have to suffer, agonize, know pain, and pay for what they have done. None of us have to, because someone has suffered, been humiliated, agonized, known pain and earned our return and that is Jesus Christ. By his wounds, we are healed. Because of Jesus Christ, we can come back home.

The prodigal son who came back – whom many of us who have probably have encountered, yet we know from our experience, that he/she has a lot of work to do to restore trust with the family, to make up for lost time, to repair relationships within the estate, and to rebuild what he/her damaged by his/her departure.

He will need the support and help of the family, including the older brother. When we come across people who realize they have done wrong, they don't need our recriminations.

They need our help to begin to walk once more with the Church, to walk the way of life and not death. That should have been the lesson of the older brother – a willingness to accept and forgive.

+It reminds me of a story about a woman who had upset her pastor because she claimed that she had conversations with God and had attracted quite a following. The pastor thought all this was getting out of hand, so he went to visit her. "I know you say you are talking with God," he said, "but what you hear talking back at you is just your imagination. Just to prove it, I want you to ask God to name three of the sins that I confessed this morning. Then tell me what God said. If you can name those sins, I'll believe that you really are talking with God." The woman sat there for a long while, praying. Then she looked up and said, "I asked God to name your three sins, but God said, 'I forgot.'"

3. Finally, there is the father willing to take a repentant son back and seeking to bring reconciliation to his family. We have a number of people today who are experts in polarization - Just look at the presidential campaign as proof.

The work of bridge building between divided people is the majestic vocation of being a peacemaker and has its own expertise. The path of the father for all of us is to be bridge builders, not walls.

+Who can forget Ronald Regan's words concerning the Berlin Wall, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall! I could very well hear Jesus saying this to me, "Patrick, tear down your walls!"

Yes, this is a great parable for Lent that speaks to every one of us: Through the prodigal son, it speaks about the importance of coming to say, "I have sinned." Through the older brother, it speaks of the need of those who repent for our help, not the resentment of the older brother. Through the forgiving father, it speaks to us about the importance of bridge building.

Which of these three, the prodigal son, the older brother or the forgiving father, speaks to us this Lent? Each one of these examples opens a door and shows a path to Easter.