

The beginning of today's gospel says "Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So to them Jesus addressed this parable." Actually, this introduces three parables in Luke's gospel: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and this masterpiece of literature called the parable of the Prodigal Son. All three were addressed to the Pharisees and scribes complaining about Jesus welcoming sinners.

Consider the groups here. Tax collectors had essentially sold their souls to the Romans in order to extort money out of their own people. Sinners, well, I'm not sure what one did to be publicly known as a sinner, but these people did it whatever it was. The Pharisees strived to live holy lives, teaching that holiness was not just for priests but for everyone. The scribes were well learned in Scripture and in the Law of Moses. Here's a question: of all the groups there, tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees and scribes, which do you think were more likely to be the church-goers?

That's easy! The Pharisees and the scribes would be right up there in front! Tax collectors and sinners would be too busy with their businesses or their sporting events or whatever else they did that was more important to them than God... if they even believed in God... which they probably did because the ancients were much more clear-headed about that than our generation. We want everything to be scientifically provable . . . even though Science itself is not scientifically provable.

But that's a whole different homily. My focus now is that tax collectors and sinners probably didn't spend a lot of time at church. They probably figured God wouldn't want to have anything to do with them anyway. The Pharisees and scribes were the church-goers in the crowd and it was to them that Jesus addressed this parable.

So... are there any church-goers around here in this... church? Well, I'm right up here in front, and I come here often too! And I see a lot of familiar faces out there! It's probably a safe bet that most of us here are a bunch of church-goers. We may just be the sort of people to whom Jesus addressed this parable.

Now, he didn't forget the tax collectors and sinners in the crowd, the ones who thought God wouldn't want to have anything to do with them. They'd be able to identify with that younger son, squandering his inheritance, not to mention his relationship with his father, on what seemed at the time to be a lot of fun. Imagine them hearing that the Father would be excited, even ecstatic, to have them back, and throwing a big party for them. But did you ever think the older son, the one who stayed with the father, did his work, did everything he was supposed to do, got the short end of the stick? The brat gets a party, feasting on the fatted calf but the responsible son doesn't even get a goat to feast on with his friends! How unfair!

If you have ever felt that way, good! That means the parable is still doing its work. It was meant to make us church-goers reflect on whether or not we are REALLY acting like sons and daughters of the Father, or just going

through the motions, doing what we have to do to fulfill our duties, yes, but giving our hearts to other pursuits.

The older son didn't seem to know it, but he also had forsaken the father's ways, the ways of overabundant love. The father seems to have been looking for that younger son to come back, ran out to meet him – Jewish men did not run – they were way too cool to do any such thing. He didn't even make his son finish his speech before calling for the finest robe and the family ring and all the rest. Overabundant love!

Were those the ways of the older son? Nope! His were the ways of personal self-interest. Was he happy to see his brother again? No! Was he even happy that his father was happy? No! He did what he did to get what he got, no more. He thinks he's doing what's right but what's really right is to be like the father in his loving ways! He'd rather sit in judgement over people than treat them with respect and love. And he represented the church-goers!

How are the church-goers in front of me doing with living the Father's ways? How is the church-goer that IS me doing with it? The Father has come out to meet us. He loves us and he'd love for us to come inside and join the celebration! In order to do that, though, we'll have to be ready to welcome people who just don't do things the way we think they should be done.

Jesus left one question open, he didn't tell us what the older son chose. He's still waiting to find out what you and I will choose.