**Sermon Lent 4C**

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**Text:** *There was a man who had two sons… (Luke 15:11-23)*

My fellow redeemed in Christ, our young people are rightly taught, in the words of the Catechism, that “the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified, and kept me in the true faith.” But do we actually believe this? I don’t mean head-knowledge. I mean clinging to Christ like St. Mary Magdalene, despite all reason and experience, after he rose from the dead. The Spirit our Lord sent that Easter evening gives us the same confidence, whether it is felt or even thoughtfully worked out or not. The Sirit creates “faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel” and the Sacraments (AC V 1-2).

How does he go about this? The Spirit does not come immediately any more than our daily bread comes to our tables. Our Church is not devoid of means to console sinners who feel their guilt, to build up and not tear down the faith of it saints, to feed and nourish God’s beloved children. This is because our faith is not an impoverished faith. In our Gospel lesson for today, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, what does the father do? He does not even wait for his lost son to finish his journey home, but as our Lord says: “while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” Not stopping there, the father orders his “servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us celebrate.” (Luke 15:20, 22-23)

The Spirit, acting on the Father’s behalf, is himself the love shared between the Father and the Son in the eternal, blessed Trinity. The means of sharing grace with God’s children, therefore, cannot be anything but loving. The Bridegroom and the bridesmaids say to his Bride (an icon of the Church), “Your cheeks are lovely with ornaments, your neck with strings of jewels.’ ‘We will make for you ornaments of gold, studded with silver.’” (Song 1:10-11) True, however, the gifts our heavenly Bridegroom, Christ our Lord, lavish upon us do not look as costly or impressive as a pearl necklace, a golden ring, or a royal robe. They are the humblest and commonest of gifts: water, bread, and wine. Nevertheless, the Baptismal water is “rich in grace”; and whoever believes these words, “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,” has exactly what they say.

Our Father’s embrace is never without visible confirmation. Through the “servants” – that is, ministers – of the Church, serving the sacramental ministry, we like the Prodigal Son receive the robe of Christ’s righteousness. Return to our home in Holy Baptism. Hearing the holy Absolution: “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Bodily eating and drinking, not doubting but firmly believing these words: “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”

These tangible gifts God has given his Church on earth are modelled not only the Song of Solomon, resplendent in its imagery, but also the equally vivid Fifty-First Psalm. In that penitential Psalm, King David lives out the rôle of the Prodigal Son in Jesus’ parable. “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.” (Ps 51:3-4) These words are echoed in the words spoken from son to father, “I have sinned against heaven and before you.” (Luke 15:21) We resemble the repentant son being clothed with the garb of royalty – though not an earthly royalty, but a heavenly one.

 But what David knows, and what we know, is that God’s mercy preempts any confession we may make. The king confidently asks the Lord to “purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” (Ps 51:7) The herb known as “hyssop” had sprawling leaves. It was used as a sponge, as well as in worship, where the Levites would scatter water on congregants in the Temple. King David, despite his grievous sins of adultery, deceit, conspiracy, and theft, hopes to join the assembly of the righteous. This admittance does not come automatically but requires renewal in the Holy Spirit. The king need not ask for a second circumcision, nor for that matter, a second anointing. Instead he pleads: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” (vv. 10-12)

Tragically, the means of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are often defamed as "impediments" or "added requirements" over and above Christian faith. Many souls are misguided into searching for a "mere Christianity" (as one otherwise helpful book has unhelpfully claimed for its title). But that is to strip the Temple of its treasury and gold furnishings, like King Ahaz of the Old Testament; or, to use a more apt metaphor, like unravelling a woolen coat. Are the purple robe and shoes impediments to the Father's love, or tokens of it? Can we claim to love the Father but stay at distance from his house? No; rather, “He who craves a precious treasure / Neither cost nor pain will measure; But the priceless gifts are boundless / Though the souls it feeds are countless.”

The Finnish theologian Frederick Hedberg draws upon our Gospel imagery to illustrate this wonder that we are saved, not by our own works, but by the working of the Holy Spirit in us. He is, as said before, is the loving embrace the Father extends to us, we who have been called his children by grace on account of Jesus Christ, his only Son by nature. Writes Hedberg:

Because it is his own child who depends on his father, he willingly has mercy again, takes his child into his arms and forgives his wrongdoing, though not without chastening. In the same way but to a greater degree, He who is the true Father over all those who are called fathers in heaven and earth, has mercy then on His poor, weak and wretched children in this world of sin and temptation. He has mercy on those who trust His strong Word and eternal covenant. He indeed remembers the covenant of grace which He made with them already in baptism and the precious promises to which they now hold by faith.

What does this mean? Hedberg continues to say that: “Even then, a timid and troubled conscience wavers, trembles and shakes thinking: ‘Someone like me has no part in His grace for only better people and the holy and deserving qualify for it.’ Look now, the apostle does not extend God’s grace and peace according to your own merit or because of your holiness, for in that case it would then no longer be grace.” Just so. And though we are saved by grace alone, that does not mean that grace is ever “alone”; it comes with a gold or silver chalice and a kiss of peace from our Saviour. “He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.” (Song 2:4)