



Bringing Home the Word



Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 6, 2016

Reconciling, Not Typecasting

By Janel Esker

Actors dread being typecast—becoming so identified with a particular kind of role (such as villain) that they aren't offered other kinds. But you don't have to be in show business to be typecast by others: "That's my sister, the Gossip." "My husband is a Workaholic." "My friend is the Late One: never on time for anything." It can be hard to break out of these molds.

Typecasting has no place in the spiritual life, however. Saint Paul tells us that everyone in Christ is a "new creation" and that, just as we have been

reconciled to God, we are also called to the "ministry of reconciliation." The father in the Prodigal Son story is a remarkable model of such behavior. He doesn't view his son as a sinful, wasteful ingrate; instead, he nearly trips over himself running to greet his son and throw him a huge party. The father is the "prodigal" one—extravagant and wasteful in his love and forgiveness for his son.

During Lent, we may identify particularly with that younger son in our need for repentance and forgiveness. But what if we try to model ourselves after the father, who releases his son from typecasting and welcomes him as a new creation? Can we see everyone as redeemable no matter how many times they've frustrated, annoyed, or wounded us? Maybe we hold a childhood grudge against our parent. Maybe our spouse lacks communication skills. Maybe our boss just seems plain crazy. Are they forever typecast in our minds, or might we see them as a new creation in God? Christ gives us the ministry of reconciliation—but will we practice it? †

A Word from Pope Francis

Lent, dear brothers and sisters, is the opportune time to look within ourselves, to understand our truest spiritual needs, and to ask the Lord's help in prayer....Mercy is greater than prejudice. We must learn this well! Mercy is greater than prejudice, and Jesus is so very merciful, very!....Because every encounter with Jesus changes our lives, always. It is a step forward, a step closer to God. And thus every encounter with Jesus changes our life. It is always, always this way.



—*Angelus*, March 23, 2014

Sunday Readings

Joshua 5:9a, 10–12

"On the day after the Passover... no longer was there manna for the Israelites."

2 Corinthians 5:17–21

"Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away."

Luke 15:1–3, 11–32

"This son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS REFLECTION

- How do I live a compassionate life? How can I give and receive mercy?
- Where can I remove labels or stereotypes from my life and community?

Damage Control: The Benefits of Penance

By Fr. Stephen Rehrauer, CSsR

During Lent, we Catholics should ask ourselves what we really believe about the moral quality of human nature. Are people basically good, or are we evil? The answer to this question has a profound effect not only on how we see and treat others, but on the type of morality with which we feel most comfortable.

Early Protestant reformers taught that human nature is evil. Our nature has been so destroyed and damaged by both original and personal sin that nothing good is left in the human being. We are totally depraved and deprived, our nature being a wild beast that is out of control. Free will, as the ability to choose between good and evil, is an illusion. We are justified by faith, but we remain basically evil and ordered toward the doing of evil. People are untrustworthy and incapable of controlling themselves. Nothing we can do has merit in itself. So the Church must help us minimize the damage we will naturally do. Morality's job is to allow and forbid by using law, punishment, and reward—public approval or disgrace.

Catholic tradition disagrees. We view human nature as damaged but still oriented toward goodness. Original innocence was lost, but we are not devoid of all goodness. Free will and reason remain, although they are disordered,



work less efficiently, and are highly prone to error. We are still capable of knowing, choosing, and doing what is authentically good. But to know the truth about goodness and to use our freedom properly, we need the gift of salvation, which truly heals the wounded quality of our nature by way of divine grace. Persons are not wild beasts; they are good but flawed, capable of becoming better with God's help in Christ.

A morality built on this understanding of human nature cooperates with God's initiative, combining recourse to the sacraments as sources of divine grace with prayer and meditation to educate the mind and strengthen the will. It uses norms, rules, and laws as guides to help us make correct decisions and choices and to help us see into and move beyond the darker side of our nature. The Church is mother and teacher, not moral policeman.

Catholic and Protestant traditions agree that we live in a world affected and at times controlled by the power of sin. No one can follow the commandment to love God and neighbor perfectly in this life, because living in a world still affected by the power of sin often limits our ability to love effectively and fully. We find ourselves—directly against our own better natures—engaging in, cooperating in, and benefitting from evil.

And so during Lent, we Catholics repent and do penance to remind us that salvation is not yet complete in us. We are not as free or as smart as we like to think we are. Penance reminds us that we cannot save ourselves or our world, that we have not yet made sufficient use of the healing God continues to offer us. We do penance during Lent to remind ourselves that our nature is still wounded and that without Christ, we are neither free, wise, nor capable of fulfilling our very nature and becoming as good as we were created to be. †

PRAYER

Lord, you are the face of God's compassion in the world. Give me a compassionate heart to embrace my suffering brothers and sisters.

—From *Mindful Meditations for Every Day of Lent and Easter*,
Rev. Warren J. Savage
and Mary Ann McSweeney

WEEKDAY READINGS

March 7–12

Mon. Lenten Weekday: Isaiah 65:17–21 /
John 4:43–54
Tue. Lenten Weekday: Ezekiel 47:1–9, 12/
John 5:1–16
Wed. Lenten Weekday: Isaiah 49:8–15 /
John 5:17–30

Thu. Lenten Weekday: Exodus 32:7–14 /
John 5:31–47
Fri. Lenten Weekday: Wisdom 2:1a, 12–22 /
John 7:1–2, 10, 25–30
Sat. Lenten Weekday: Jeremiah 11:18–20 /
John 7:40–53

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