

Words like “reconcile” and “reconciliation” occur five times in today’s brief reading from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians. In Christ, Paul says, God has reconciled the world to himself and has entrusted to the apostles and other preachers what he calls the “ministry of reconciliation.” Paul and the others are to proclaim the good news of God’s mercy and forgiveness and to invite people to be reconciled with God and with one another.

As eloquent and powerful as Paul’s words are, the parable in today’s gospel brings his message alive in an even more memorable and moving way.

Traditionally called the parable of the Prodigal Son, more recently people have tended to include in its title a reference to the merciful father. I remember an experience I had in my first year as a priest of reading this parable for a class of grade 4 children and then, a short time later, for a group of 20 year olds in what was then called the Normal School or teachers’ college.

I asked both groups who they thought was the most important person in the story. The children almost unanimously responded, “the father,” while the majority of the twenty year olds opted for the son. With the passing years, I have become increasingly impressed by the insight of the children. The most striking about the parable is, in fact, the attitude and actions of the father.

The opening verses of the reading offer a key to the parable. The Pharisees and scribes, representatives of the religious establishment of the time, are scandalized by the fact the Jesus welcomes among his listeners tax collectors and sinners and even eats with them.

Eating with others in the ancient world was often more than a matter of assuaging hunger. In many cases, it presupposed and was intended to deepen a relationship with them. The fact that a prophet or religious teacher, especially one proclaiming the coming of God's kingdom or reign, would eat with the kind of people with whom Jesus is eating suggested to those who saw him that the message of salvation he was preaching was meant for such people. It was against this that the Pharisees and others reacted.

The fact that the younger son demands his inheritance while his father is still alive is a profound insult to him. In taking what one day would have been his, the son turns his back on his father and on all that the father stands for.

When the young man, having squandered his inheritance, returns home seeking at best to be taken on as a hired hand, the father, on seeing him, is moved to compassion, runs to him, puts his arms around him and kisses him. No

explanation is necessary. The only thing that matters to the father is that his son has come home.

As much as we tend to focus on the relationship between the father and the prodigal, there is another character in the story, the older brother, someone with whom, I suspect, many of us might well identify. He is the good son, the one who stayed with and supported his father and who cared for the family property. Outraged at the generous and enthusiastic welcome given his brother, he complains that nothing like that has ever been done for him. To show his displeasure and anger, he refuses to take part in the celebration then underway.

The father's response to the son's refusal reveals the depth of his understanding and compassion. In the conversation with the father that follows, the elder son refers to the prodigal as "this son of yours," implicitly denying the bond that unites him to his brother. The father, far from berating him, urges him to remember who the prodigal is. We had to celebrate and rejoice, he says, because "this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."

By ending the story without telling us how the older son responds to the invitation of his father, Jesus presents his critics and us with a challenge. God's

mercy and compassion, the parable affirms, are greater than ours. That should not make us sad and jealous but humble and grateful, full of wonder at the mystery of God's forgiveness and love.

Earlier in his Gospel, Luke summed up much of the moral and spiritual teaching of Jesus in the phrase, "Be merciful as your heavenly father is merciful." Be merciful, we might say, as the father in today's parable is merciful. Mercy, I believe is at the heart of the vision, which Pope Francis has of his ministry. Believing firmly in God's mercy, he also believes that mercy ought to be a distinctive characteristic of the church, of its leaders and of all those who in any way represent it.