

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare Sunday)
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Rejoice!*

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Around two decades ago, I did one of the hardest things in my life. And that was to lose a lot of weight and keep it off. I had been practicing as a Wall Street lawyer for a number of years, and the long hours of sitting at my desk and poor eating habits had started to take a toll on my health. After consulting with my doctor, I decided that I needed to make some serious lifestyle changes.

Over the course of a year, I learned about portion control, the basics of nutrition, and how to exercise more effectively. One of the more interesting things that I learned, however, was the importance of taking an occasional break from my diet and exercise regimen.

In particular, I learned that it's critical to have a "cheat day." A cheat day is one day a week when you take a break from the strictness of your diet. You can eat anything you want, like the cupcake you've been dreaming about for the past week. Without a cheat day, your body goes into starvation mode, and your progress grinds to a halt. So breaks are essential.

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent. There are a number of names for this day: Refreshment Sunday, Mothering Sunday, Rose Sunday, and Laetare Sunday. Regardless of what it's called, the basic point of today is the same. On this day, we take a break, or a liturgical "cheat day," from our regular Lenten practices.

Just as it's important to take breaks while trying to lose weight, today is the church's recognition that we need a break to get through the forty days of Lent. In England, it was on this day that servants were allowed to go home and to visit their families and their hometown, or mother, church. That's why it was called Refreshment Sunday or Mothering Sunday.

Some of you may have noticed several liturgical changes with today's mass. For example, you may have noticed that there are flowers on the altar today, something that we haven't done since Ash Wednesday. We also took a break this morning from the Great Litany in procession at the start of the mass. Instead, we chanted the Ten Commandments and processed in the usual way.

But perhaps the most noticeable change is our new rose vestments and altar frontal. Typically the sacred ministers wear violet vestments during Lent to signify repentance. On the Fourth Sunday of Lent, however, we wear rose vestments to signify a lighter and more joyful

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mood. This is why one of the names for today is Rose Sunday. In fact, it is on this day that the pope traditionally blesses gold roses that are then given to basilicas and shrines around the world.

But the Fourth Sunday in Lent is more than just taking a liturgical break or pretty vestments. It is really about the spiritual importance of rejoicing. As I mentioned earlier, one of the names for today is Laetare Sunday. “Laetare” is the Latin word for “rejoice.” And it’s the first word that we heard in today’s mass.

To be honest with you, sometimes I find it a lot easier to wallow in shame and guilt – especially during Lent – than to rejoice in the blessings that I’ve received from God. Maybe it’s because I grew up Roman Catholic. Or maybe it’s because I grew up Asian American. Regardless of the reason, Laetare Sunday is a gentle corrective to my innate resistance to rejoicing.

It’s fitting that today’s gospel reading is the parable of the prodigal son. There’s a whole lot of rejoicing in this well-known story. The parable begins with a younger son who demands his inheritance from his father. He takes the money, leaves his home for a distant country, and then squanders everything away in dissolute living – devouring his property with prostitutes, as his older brother puts it. When a famine hits, the young man ends up feeding pigs for a living. He’s so hungry that he fantasizes about eating the pigs’ food. He realizes that he would be better off returning home and being a servant to his father. So he heads back home.

The young man has an “I’m sorry” speech all prepared in his head. He is ready to grovel for forgiveness. But when his father sees him from far away, it is the father who runs over to embrace him with joy. The son receives the best robe, a ring, and sandals. The father throws a party for him and instructs the servants to kill the fatted calf. Both the father and the son rejoice at his homecoming.

The point of the parable is this: In the same way that the father in the parable rejoices at his son’s homecoming, God rejoices whenever we return home from the “distant country” of our sins. God comes running towards us even before we’ve had a chance to say I’m sorry. God’s generosity and love for us is beyond measure. And because of that, we rejoice.

But let’s not forget the other main character in this parable, the older brother. How does he fit into this story about rejoicing? We know that the older brother is the responsible one. He is faithful, hard-working, and never leaves home. (Can you tell that I’m an older brother?) The parable ends with the older brother’s anger at his father’s loving treatment of the younger brother. In fact, he is so angry that he refuses to join the party. “I have worked like a slave for you all these years,” the older brother snaps at the father. “And yet I have never even received a goat to celebrate for my friends.”

Now if we are honest with ourselves, we would acknowledge that there are times when we feel like the older brother in the parable. That is, we are simply unable to rejoice in the good things that happen to others. We can be so focused on the perceived injustice done to ourselves that we cannot be happy for others.

This inability to rejoice has a name: envy. Envy is, of course, one of the seven deadly sins. You know the seven deadly sins: pride, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, lust, and envy. It's been said that envy is the least "fun" of the seven deadly sins. Let's face it: Gluttony is fun. Sloth is fun. Lust is certainly fun. And even the release that comes from anger can be pleasurable. But envy is a state of joylessness that is the opposite of fun. Envy not only eats away at our relationship with others, but it eats away at our own self-esteem and self-love.

Many of the broken relationships in scripture arise from envy. The first murder resulted from Cain's envy of his brother Abel, who offered the sacrifice that God preferred. Joseph was sold into slavery by his older brothers, who envied the love shown to him by their father Jacob. And, as John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*, Satan's rebellion and fall from grace was due to his envy of God's beloved son, Jesus Christ. It's no accident that envy is at the heart of the tenth and last commandment that we heard at the beginning of this morning's mass: "Thou shalt not covet."

There are a number of interesting studies out there about envy. For one thing, envy usually occurs with people who are similar to you. For example, it's hard for me to be envious of, say, an Olympic snowboarder. I've never snowboarded in my life. In fact, the last time I engaged in competitive sports was probably my high school gym class.

But my priest colleagues are another matter. How do I really feel about my priest friend who was just elected the rector of a fancy parish? Or another priest friend who was just appointed canon theologian to a diocese? I would be lying if I didn't acknowledge the feelings of envy that arise within me when I hear about those things.

Another interesting thing about envy is that it's often the most shameful of all the sins. We don't like to admit that we are envious of others. We try to hide it. The six other deadly sins are on display all over social media. Twitter and Instagram are breeding grounds for pride, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust. But how often do we acknowledge the secret envy that lies behind our clicking of the "like" button on Facebook? Not often, if at all.

Turning back to today's gospel text, I am struck by the loving response of the father to the older brother's envy. "All that is mine is yours," the father says. "We must celebrate and rejoice because your brother was dead and he has come to life. He was lost and now is found." We *must* celebrate and rejoice. God's love, like the father's love, is not a zero-sum game. God's love is not a contest. We don't lose simply because someone else wins. In God's economy, there is always enough love to go around – and then some.

At the end of today's mass, we will sing the Angelus together, in recognition of the Feast of the Annunciation that occurred this past Monday. Some of you might be more catholic when it comes to the Virgin Mary. Others of you might be more protestant. Regardless of where you fall on the broad spectrum with respect to Mariology, however, we can all look to Mary – on this Mothering Sunday – as a role model for saying "yes" to God's love and rejoicing in God's amazing grace.

On this Laetare Sunday, let us rejoice in the radical generosity of God. Whenever we repent of our sins, God runs to meet us – as with the prodigal son – before we’ve even had a chance to say “I’m sorry.” And, whenever we are envious and unable to rejoice in the good fortune of others, God lovingly reminds us – as with the older brother – that all that God has is already ours. That is Good News indeed in the midst of this Lenten season. Rejoice!