

**“...this son of mine ...was lost and has been found....”**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

**Once upon a time**, a runaway boy, named David, is sitting by the side of the road. He’s writing a letter home to his mother. The letter expresses the hope that his old-fashioned father will forgive him and accept him again as a son. The boy writes:

**“Dear Mother, in a few days, I’ll be passing our property. If dad will take me back, ask him to tie a white cloth on the apple tree in the field next to the house.”**

Days later, David is seated on a train. It rapidly approaches his home. Two pictures flash back & forth in his mind: a tree with a white cloth tied to it and a tree without a white cloth tied to it.

As the train draws nearer and nearer, David’s heart beats faster and faster.

Soon, the tree will be visible around the bend. David cannot bring himself to look at it. He’s afraid the white cloth will not be there. Turning to the man next to him, he says, nervously:

**“Mister, will you do me a favor? Around the bend, on the right, you’ll see a tree. Tell me if there’s a white cloth tied to it.”**

As the train rumbles past, David stares straight ahead. Then, in a quaking voice, he asks:

**“Mister, is a white cloth tied to one of the branches of the tree?”**

The man answers in a surprised voice:

**“Why, Son, there’s a white cloth tied to every branch on the tree!”**

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*I share that story with you because it illustrates what Jesus is saying in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of today’s Gospel, which I/Deacon Vic just read to you from St. Luke.*

What, exactly, is Jesus saying in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of today’s Gospel, you ask.

**Well, I am glad you asked that question!**

He’s saying that God always forgives us after we sin, once we return to him. As a matter of fact, Jesus is saying even more. He’s saying that God not only forgives us after returning once we’ve sinned, **BUT** that he also treats us as if we hadn’t sinned to begin with! This is clear from the three things the father does in today’s parable.

**1<sup>st</sup>**, he **embraces his son**. Embracing the boy shows that the father welcomes him back fully. He withholds no sign of affection from him.

**2<sup>nd</sup>**, the father puts **shoes on his feet**. Putting shoes on the boy’s feet shows that the father forgives him fully. In biblical times, shoes were a sign of a ‘free-person.’ Slaves went barefooted. This takes away the sign that he was somebody’s slave, but, now, that he was somebody’s son!

**3<sup>rd</sup>**, he gives his son a **ring**. Putting a ring on the boy’s finger shows that the father restores him, fully, to the status he had before he ran away. Undoubtedly, it was a Signet ring, containing the family seal. To have it meant to have the power to act in the family’s name...a super charge card!

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And this brings me to the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of today's parable.

It deals with, not the younger son, **but** with the older son.

Specifically, it contrasts the father's **lavish forgiveness** with the older son's **lack of forgiveness**.

The older son won't come into the house to celebrate, even though the father begs him to come in. Alas, the parable ends without telling us what the older son did.

Did he come **in** and celebrate or did he stay **outside** and sulk?

To my way of thinking, the reason Jesus doesn't tell us what he did is because of who the two sons stand for: the older son stands for the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' time. The younger son stands for the sinners and outcasts of the time.

The outcasts and sinners (like the younger son) are responding to Jesus' call to return and repent, come inside. Jesus, in turn, is forgiving them—even celebrating with them! **BUT**... (like the older son) this angers the scribes/Pharisees. They think such people should be **punished**, not **forgiven**.

And so Jesus tells his parable in such a way that each scribe and Pharisee must write his own end to the story. Each, perhaps representing us, realizes he is the older brother and must decide whether to forgive his brother/sister and to celebrate or ...**not to forgive** and **not to celebrate**.

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So-o, what's the practical application of all this ...for us, here, today? I think it says two things:

**1<sup>st</sup>**, it says that God will always forgive us after we sin ... **if** we return with sincere remorse, especially via the Sacrament of Reconciliation if necessary.

**2<sup>nd</sup>**, it says that we should forgive others ...as readily and as fully as God has forgiven us! In rare cases, where the offense has been so grievous, say, someone has murdered one of our loved ones, we are **still** expected, over time ...even if we cannot fully restore that offender to 'full former status' ... **we are expected to forgive** and, at least, **be civil towards such people** —if 'distant.'

Remember how Jesus treated Peter after he went so far as to denying him three times, saying: **'I know not the man.'** Jesus not only forgave Peter, **BUT** ... **made him the 'rock,'** upon which he would build his Church! That is the **'ideal'** to which we should try to aim in our **'forgiving.'**

I now close with this prayer:

**Lord, show me your mercy and fill my heart with your loving forgiveness.**

**I am the younger child, who ran away and has returned home.**

**Thank you!... for receiving me back.**

**I am the older child, who finds it hard to forgive, as you have forgiven me.**

**Touch my heart with your loving forgiveness.**

**Then, when I fall asleep in death, I will awaken in your presence to enjoy your forgiveness**

**forever ...together with those brothers & sisters**

**...whom I, too, have forgiven.**

May Almighty God, our Abba, bless you, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.