W.C. Chapel
Nov 23, 1975

My text this morning is the story of the Prodigal Son.
My theche is: rrrL^8xsksyxx«XL8»«xl§L8k^irx "The .iGfee ~~of Grace~~" of God's Grao."

This past Thursday, as you know, this College dedicated its new Hilary, with much fanfare. Everybody who was anyboHzx was there. All the chairs in this Chapel were assiduously dusted. The College's police force was marshalled all over the place in their white gloves, just in case anyone got lost. And, after the ~~ceremonies~~ in this building, everyone was properly seraneade^with chamber music and fed with late-afternoon goodies, as they saptered around the thick carpets of that temple of academic affluence across the way. Rumors have it that at least one big donor was so impressed that he promised to give even more. All in all, it was a memorable, successful afternoon for this College.

That very, day, as most of you know, we^had a fasU/jfJ&a. This was a nations* ~~sponsored~~ by OXFAM, for remembering the hungry around the world and for reconsidering our own responsibilities. We had a fast day, it seems, but nobody came. The people who observed the fast here apparently were very few in number. Quantitatively, to say no more, it was a memorable failure.

It seems to de that those two events highlight the place where many of us find ourselves today, caught somewhere between the well-fed festivity of academic affluence and the irksome unfilled gnawing stomachs of moral conscience. And the dlrift of everything seems to be toward the former, toward the affluence and away from the ~~ORBKIL~~ painfulness of moral passion.

We have the same thing all over again, ***Ig*** do we not, as we approach Thanksgiving. This^fci?sday this nation will glut itself with food to the point of being LXLHU sick. On that very day, like every other day, 10,000 people around this globe will die of starvation. Yet most of us will be pulled, will fee not, toward the affluence and away from the painfulness of moral passion.

Now my purpose this morning is not to suggest to anyone that you shouldn't go to library dedications or that you shouldn't! enjoy your Thanksgiving dinner. My purpose is rather to suggest that ***S&r*** perspective for understanding the bind in which mSStL of us find ourselves may bs too nxxxaMr narrow. We,leel the lure ®f well-cushioned affluence. We^reel the pain of a well-tutored conscience. In addition, I want to remind all of us, we can feel and do feel the 'kiss -of * God's grace. nat's what it seems to me God is wanting to say to us this day through the story of the Prodigal Son.

~~MX~~ I.

I guess I don't have to say too much about our prodigality. As a nation, with five per cent of the world's population, we Americans consume some forty per cent of the world's resources. The average American wastes enough faMS food each day to feed a family of six in India.

The other day a visitor, a woman who works for the Farm Workers, and who gets by on a subsistence level, at best, in Dorcheste^ was remarking how difficult it is for her to eat in our dormitories, to see all the food that's wasted, on our trays and in our kitchens.

Whim Jun I-b;i.-i-li-ihmit j ~~t. really, it's no"7h to make you sick, 1nn'L "tT~~

Well, the prodigal laid claim to what he thought was his, and then he took off. He wanted his share of things. He wanted to grab hold of his property, privately, as it were. Sure, he must have been taught at some time that the earth is the Lord's, that all the bounty of this earth — as it's celebrated in Psalm 104, for example -- that all the riches of this earth are intended as blessings for all peoples indeed for all creatures, not as things to be hogged, 37 ~*i*L imie*&. for himself. He must have been taught that the earth is the Lord's. But he wanted to grab what he thought was his and do with it what he wanted to do, as he wanted, when he wanted.

It turned out, though, that when he hogged the wealth he ended up with the hogs. It's a kind of natural law of God's creation, isTfr" ~~athri lrdh hngn the i~~rtkih rnd*5T"rqr wi th ^ ~~the. hogo~~. God sets limits in this world, like gravity. You may think you're such a groovy person that you can fly, but don't try jumping off the Empire State Building^ ■ ymiMjawi1 ~~xkvlx~~mxyxk Likewise at the ecological level. You isaxx may think that it's your right to kax live in an over-heated house, with all manner of power gadgets and power tools. But V watch out, or you're going to run out of gas, and then where will you be?

The social critic, Ivan Illich, may not be right about everything, but he seems to have a point when he suggests that our society has lost control of the machines we have created to serve our well-being. Now, it seems, more and more, w§ are serving the machines, instead of vice versa. Consider the paxxis parish down the street, for example. to c alªCnurch £ s ■eidBS&K I know have, to varying degrees, become~the" slaves of their parish plants: they have to raise enough money to buy , the feel to feed the furnances in order to keep enough people warm enough so they will want to give money to the church to pay the bills for the buel that feeds the furnaces, and so on.

When you hog the wealth, you end up with the hogs, in oije way or another. Look at the face of the prodigal as you see it depicted on the back of today's bulletin. I ask you,i«=- ^ ~~f~hTl~ not; th~~e-Jari? ~~nf ycwir local ElKggy parish-pries-fr?~~ Is that not the face of your standard operating run-of-the-mill Christian at places like Welleliyy College?

And beyond this Thanksgiving, brothers and sisters, I reluctantly remind you, Christmas is coming. Already the lights are up in some towns. If Thanksgiving's a glut of affluence, Christmas is an orgy. How can any sensitive soul survive two such so-called holidays? How long can anyone wallow with the pigs and sustain any sense of kxsi herself or himself as a human being?

II.

Now the Prodigal Son "came to himself." That expression has baffled ^W^commenkators. On the surface, it seems to mean simply that in his misery it dawned on him that he didn't have to be so miserable, that things might be better elswwhere, particularly back home. Commentators kaxEniXx haven't been happy with that xurfaxE rather mundane description of the Prodigals repentance, as they would have it, for as everyone knows genuine repentance is no hum-drum, mundane affair, it has to do with the whole soul

But it seems to me that the prodigal's coming to himgelf, such as it was, isn't really the major point of the story.^^Nor it it the major point of your story or WX mine, as we wallow in our own affluence with the uneasy sense that life can be pretty miserable if all there is to it is^waTlowing. Indeed, our repentance, when it does happen, it seems to me,is actually no big deal? not necessarily any particularly daamatic experience in our lives? probably much more etf **an*** uneasy sense that it would be better to live some other way.

The story of the Prodigal is set by Luke right after the story of the shepherd who losses one sh^ep and goes searching for it, leaving the 99 aloneny^frrikn right after the story of the ppor woman who looses a coin of great value to kHaxx haaxx her and searches diligently untill she finds it. The story of the prodigal is the storyth^n of the Opd who goes search'a:or the prodigals of the? Goa mio^runs out to great the returning son, who, before the son can even speak,embraces him and kisses him in joyX and compassion. The Greek word here is rich, ~~with~~ **maaBMtfrj** it suggests that the father kisses the son tenderly.

S^he Prodigal did come to himself. And that's not without its own mundane kind of importance. But whatj_s decisive about the story, what holds it altogether, andjlntegrates it with the rest of the New Testament,is ^hatx the father rushes out to embrace and-dw-rT his lost son^enSerfy/""

III.

This is not the place, I do believe, to deal with the imagery of the parable. I'm very much away^ as I know jgss many of you are, perhaps more than I am, that it's highly problematic, to say the least, to keep- thinking Sf God just as Our Father -- and, good heavens, to keep thinking of us Christians somehow as God's sons, rather than God's daughters and sons.

On other occasions, I trust, and with other texts, Ti —qai | we'll surely be wanting to deal with these important questions. Xefca. I think we might miss the sweetness of this text, were we to pause too long to consider its laSBtriisbe patrittrchical narrowness. Let me try to tell you what I mean by that sweetness, in terms of my own experience.

For a long time, in my preaching and in various talks I've been giving on various circuits, I've taken a certain Jonah-like pleasure in preaching repentance to the Ninevites. ~~I. gpan,~~ has seemed clear to me, and it still does, that one of the main accents of biblical theology is that God cares for the poor and the oppressed, first and foremost.

I won't belabor that point now. But I think it can be demonstrated, from the Book of Amos to the Gospel of Luke, from the Song of Miriam to the Magnificat of Mary: the God whom we confess in the Church cares for the poor and the oppressed first and foremost. Over the last Aecade or so that's been a recurrent emphasis in my preaching and skkax writing, and so forth. And I think it's true.

In the last year or so, however, I^W^iL"more and more been detecting a certain wistfulness in my voice, a certain sadness even, when I've talked about God's liberation of the ppor and the oppressed.

Mostly, for me, it emerges in the form of humor. I've heard myself saying to sama friends here and there: "'gee, I wish I was oppressed/[1] I- ~~mean, fniijr-i t~~ this-aa^-qahat^L~~ssay, an~~shateaS- ~~true.~~ I'm white, anglo-saxon, Protestant, affluent, male, even right-handed! When ever anyorje^s oppressed, it seems, I'm always in the oppressing group. ~~I mean, K~~ I've really been scurrying around to find some group that I belong to that's oppressed! tzut to no avail.

I guess that's why I personally am so touched by the story of the prodigal son. Here I arn^wallowing in all this affluence, all this oppressive power, and I'm miserable. I ~~really~~ want (JO know, somehow, that God loves ***me,*** too. And that's just what the story says to me. That's why its so sweet, for me.

IV.

Then I want to tell you another very personal secret? That's why I like to go to Church every Sunday. ~~Consider junt the f-i-rot part of~~ our -Service, th«-e-enf-e&&ion-and-the -as-surance ~~of pardon.~~ . . .One of the nice things about my sabbatical last year. Ja~~y. tlRi^a~~sC <ars my rediscovery of the fact that I did_z^« like to go to Church each Sunday, that I w~~stxld~~ do it because I want4^ to?and not just because I happens®! to have fi job that requires it.

Consider here ~~part~~ ~~Aaway, regarding~~ the first part of our service, the confession and assurance of pardon. To me, that's the story of the Prodigal writ large, for me and for everyone: "And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longe r worthy to be called your son.'"

Then what happens? The God of grace throws this huge party for me, especially on days like last Sunday when God fed me with bread and wine, but also sahx on days like today, when he feeds me with the warmth of your smiles, and ~~sometimes~~, when not too many people are looking, the kisses of your compassion. For me, Sunday liturgy is like a surprise party every week. Isn't it sweet, isn't it beautiful, isn^t it life-giving that God loves me so, oppressor that I am, wallowing around in all this domineering affluence that I'm constantly.tedded to wallow around in(~~JuL yvt-r*-v~~

I take it that the same can be true for you, and is true for you, wherever you may happening to come from, especially insofar as the lives of all of us are caught up in the affluence of this academic community. Lsdxdsgx God loves you. God rushes out to embrace you and to kiss you, as soon as God catches sight of your face.kMXKBdxkHxard

V.

The story doesnlt give us much of a clue what the Prodigal did after Church, after the celebrations of God's grace were over.

Because the story doesn't dwell on the sequel, I 4$on't Im~~either.~~ It's surely enough for today, if I've been able to communicate to you anew something of the sweetness of God's love for you and for me, something of the Kansk tender touch of God's gracious embrace. sL ~~each one of us.~~

Yet one thing the story does want to say to us, I think, before we get on with our celebrations. After you've been embraced by grace, you're going to hear gKHtan grumbles. In the story, it happend&^to be the elder brother. In our stories, I'm not sure who it will be.

I can imagine, for example, that you and I, as affluent ones, might hear some grumbles from some Third ^orld peoples, who see us celebrating the fact that God loves us, too. Or, I can imagine we might he^r^soine, sntf4$PCjemarks from other members of this affluent .community, who are troubled, not to say threatened, by the^ fact that we confess our sins, by the fact that^L^.just happen to choose to fast onj^a day when this College is congratulating itself for having such a XEtpExxiifaxaxyx well-cushioned lihary.

But since you and I have been touched by God's gjaaee, ~~no, ovon more,~~ embraced and kissed by God, all those grumbles will roll off our backs. Mey won't even touch usLS-^L-^ we're too busy celebrating God's'^welcome.

VI.

In conclusion, I want to point out that this sermon hasn't been an "answer sermon," if any sermon every is. Following the guidelines of the parablel£_of the Prodigal, I've just tried to say one tjry^ that even those of us who are wallowing in affluence^ave a part of the action, that God runs out to embrace us and kiss us when he sees ~~our faces~~ us coming back.

Where we go from MkL is a whole other set of problems But it's sufficient for this day, to remind ourselves, that we are indeed here.

"And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am nw longer worthy to be called you son.' But the father said to 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 fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is aWive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry."