

**Monsignor Dennis Sheehan**  
**Homily Given on March 14, 2010**  
**4th Sunday of Lent – Liturgical Year C**

Let's read Jesus' story from the point of view of a strict lawyer or judge. In the law of Jesus' time, the father divided the property between two sons. It was a binding contract. Each son, the roaming wastrel and the dutiful stay-at-home, got what was his.

But in the story, the wastrel - the prodigal - shows up at home after years of self-indulgence. All right. His father gave a party. Fatted calf, new suit, and all. But what then? By law, the farm and assets belong to his older brother. By law. The younger brother might be a hired hand. When the father died, the younger boy got nothing. The party was over for him. By law.

Was that Jesus' meaning? The boy is allowed to become a hired hand and lives out his days in poverty? No. In fact, Jesus makes it quite clear that the son is welcomed back into the family. He's restored, forgiven.

Of course, the father's behavior offends our legal sense of fairness. They had a contract! He has no right! But that's just Jesus' point in telling the tale. Jesus is saying that God's love is of a quality that few, if any of us, can grasp adequately. The father restores the younger son to his place in the family, no matter for contracts, laws, and paltry human measures of "fair". We hear that God's mercy and love is total and without strings. You stayed home and were dutiful? "Child, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." The treasure trove of God's mercy cannot be emptied. You wandered and now are limping back? God's love and mercy are waiting, running toward us to fall into an embrace.

It's a weird story. Lawyers and judges would tear up their briefs. Jesus says God's mercy is beyond reason, beyond any human idea of fairness. God is a spendthrift. No human being can forgive so unconditionally. None of us can begin to fathom the depth and measure of the merciful father.

This is not a story about sin. It's not about being fair. The story is about divine love for sinners. As one preacher so aptly observed, "the Parable is a story that is almost too good to be true. The story, like God's love, is almost beyond belief."

On this joyful Lenten Sunday for mercy beyond fairness, for love beyond our comprehension, let us give thanks to the Lord our God.