The Fourth Sunday of Lent is called Laetare Sunday (Rejoice Sunday). Anticipating Easter joy, today’s readings invite us to rejoice by being reconciled with God through repentance and the confession of our sins and by celebrating our coming home to be with our loving and forgiving God. In the parable of today, there are clearly three main characters: The repentant younger son – Prodigal Son, 2) the forgiving father – Prodigal Father and 3) the self-justifying elder son – Prodigal elder son. The father has two lost sons, not one. : Prodigal, means to spend money lavishly, or with abandon. However, it can also mean, giving something on a lavish scale.

The father goes out searching for the dutiful son, just as he went out to welcome the prodigal son. But the response of each son is quite different. It is comparable to the It is similar to the parable of the story of two sons in Matthew (21:28-31): "A man had two sons. He went and said to the first, "My boy, go and work in the vineyard today." He answered, "I will not go," but afterward thought better of it and went. The man then went and said the same thing to the second who answered, "Certainly, sir," but did not go."
It is interesting to contrast the lines uttered by the two sons to their father, who went out to meet them, in the gospel of today. The prodigal son opens his lines with the word, “Father!” But the dutiful son says, "Look!" The younger feels he is not worthy to be a son (Lk 15:21), but the other has always been a slave and wants to be so (Lk 15:29). There are two other things that are important to look at in the words of the elder son:

**The prodigal elder Son:**

First of all, the Elder son thought to be good means just obeying rules. But he never enjoyed life. He thought life is about slaving for his father. He was in the house of the father but never made it his home. He was near the father, yet so far away from him. Secondly, by distancing himself from the father, he has also distanced himself from his brother. He refers to his brother as, "this son of yours". He passes judgement on his brother. The unforgiving elder son represents the self-righteous Pharisees. He had no feelings of sympathy for his brother. He played the part of a dutiful son, but his heart was not in it. He was resentful, bitter and angry. He was so jealous of his younger brother that he never wanted to see him again. He leveled a series of allegations against his prodigal brother, whom he viewed as a rival. Instead of honoring his father by joining him in accepting his brother and playing an appropriate role at the meal, the elder son publicly insulted and humiliated his father.

Perhaps the Word of God today invites us to look at ourselves – we, who are gathered here for this Sunday celebration, in obedience to church law, feeling proud that we are not like the rest of them outside the church. Also, the parable invites us to avoid self-righteousness and self-justification. **Do I obey God or do I love him? Do I feel I am a son or a slave?**

**The Prodigal younger son:**
The father did not go in search of the younger son. The son had to make the decision himself to come back. If the father had gone in search of the younger son, no doubt he would have resented it. The son had to make the decision himself, “I will arise and go to my father”. That is a decision we all have to make, to leave the illusions of happiness that the world offers us and go to our Father. If we follow the illusions of false happiness with which the world tries to seduce us we will end up with the pigs in the pigpen.

There is a great search for happiness and fulfillment in life now. The emphasis now is on enjoying life. That search for happiness and fulfillment is symbolized by the prodigal son who went in search of happiness in the parable in today’s Gospel (Luke 15). The only problem was that he thought he could find happiness in what the parable calls a life of debauchery (Luke 15:13). We would say now he tried to find happiness by satisfying his every desire whether moral or immoral. This eventually led him to living with the pigs in the piggery. But true happiness is not to be found outside of ourselves, but within ourselves, in our own hearts.

That younger son reminds us of the struggle of society at this time to be successful. In many ways, we have a spiritual famine in our country at the moment. Because of that spiritual famine in some ways, we have ended up like the younger son living with the pigs in the piggery. We could think of the instances of drug and alcohol abuse, all the fraud and stealing in the workplace, murders and violence, marital infidelity, priestly infidelity, all the rows and tensions between people. Because of these and so many other things we could say we are like the younger son living with the pigs in need of returning to our Father. So let us return, we won’t find happiness with the pigs.

**Prodigal Heavenly Father:** (because the father is generous, excessive and extravagant with his love and the Father’s prodigal love finds its completion in Jesus Christ)
In the parable, we are given the most beautiful description of our heavenly Father. He is outside of the house waiting for the younger son to return (Luke 15:20). When the son returns his father runs to him, clasps him in his arms, kisses him, brings him in and throws a party for him. When we return to God he throws a party for us. Not only does he come out of the house once, but he comes out a second time to try to persuade the elder son to come in (Luke 15:28). Our heavenly Father welcomes each of us to his party. The most beautiful line in the parable is what the father says to the elder son, “All I have is yours.” **Our heavenly Father says to us, “All I have is yours.”** This is the most beautiful promise and invitation. After reading this parable we also have a choice to make, will we stay outside or will we go in to enjoy the Father's party.

During every Mass we receive the same invitation from Jesus, “This is my Body which will be given up for you...this is the cup of my blood, it will be shed for you.” Let us go into the house and enjoy God’s party.

The younger son experienced on his return in embracing his Father “I return to the embrace of the father. I feel safe, loved, and at home. I belong here. This is home. I am in his embrace. I listen to his heartbeat. There is a new type of freedom in that security. I can just be my self – the true self. My father needs no account of the past. I want to show how much I regret, but he cuts me short. He does not warn me about the future. I am here and now with the father. That is what truly matters. This is celebration – of life. There is fun, gratification, happiness, and meaning”. This is an unconditional invitation to embrace the Father whose Mercy and Forgiveness are unconditional.

God speaks: “God is telling us, ‘I want to love you. That is all…if you choose to leave me, ‘I’ll not stop you. I will leave you free, but I will always love you. There may be a time in your life when you will separate yourself from my love but never believe that you have lost my love. You can only refuse, but you can never lose my love.”
Let us pray:
Lord Jesus, may I never doubt your love nor take for granted the mercy you have shown to me. Fill me with your transforming love that I may be merciful as you are merciful.

Jesus, I trust in you