

Distant Country
Lent 4: March 10, 2013
Sermon: Roy G. Pollina

I often remark that I am richly blessed because God has permitted me to be what I wanted to be when I grew up. I cannot remember a time when I didn't want to be a priest. When I was a young boy I sang in choir until I was old enough to become an acolyte. My freshman year in high school I spent in Junior Seminary. If you come in to my office I can show you a picture of my kindergarten class where I led the prayers at my kindergarten graduation. I always wanted to be a priest and by grace of God I am a priest. With that being said, I hope you understand that I was also typical adolescent boy who fantasized about being lots of different things. At different times I wanted to be a cowboy, a knight of the Round Table, and a jet pilot. At various times I wanted to be Sky King, Flash Gordon, and Tarzan of the Apes. My greatest fantasy hero though was...007, James Bond.

To this day it drives my wife crazy when I play my re-mastered CD sound track from Goldfinger. In my adolescent mind there was nothing greater than to drive an Astin Martin DBVII up to a Casino Royale in Monaco and order a martini: vodka not gin, shaken not stirred. It is an attractive fantasy to be man of mystery in exotic places. It is attractive. It is fantasy. When I talk to people about temptation to sin, I remind them that temptation is not fair, that temptation will attack you in your weakness. I never fail to mention the obvious: temptation to sin is also attractive, as if a little evil will make your fantasies come true.

Jesus tells the story of a young man who gave into temptation. This young man is the second son. In the culture of his day the oldest son gets a double share; the rest of the sons have to split what's left over. The young man in today's Gospel is the second son. His older brother gets to run everything after father dies and dad is still alive. Our young man is the younger brother, the younger son. It is not hard to understand that the young brother has heard the lure of "a distant country." A "distant country" is the place where you do not have to be a son; you do not have to be the younger brother. A "distant country" is a place where you can live without responsibility and without obligation. People are lured to a "distant country" all the time. Sometimes a "distant country" is a stool at a casino. Sometimes a "distant country" is a room at a motel with a lover. Sometimes a "distant country" is a bowl hash or a fifth of whiskey. Sometimes a "distant country" is as close as Myrtle Beach or Atlanta or New York City. Wherever it is a "distant country" is the place where responsibility and obligation end. It is also where life is not lived it is squandered. A "distant country" promises everything but delivers famine and want. In a "distant country" so glitzy in its attractiveness there is only emptiness and loneliness. In a "distant country" so attractive in its freedom there is slavery of one kind or another. A good example of this was the kids I went to college with; the ones who were part of the drug scene of the late 60's and early 70's. These kids were

always together, guys, and girls, always going to parties and concerts. From a distance it seemed they had fun, friends and not a care in the world. The truth was that many of them were slaves to the drugs they ingested. Not necessarily addiction, but slavery. When they ran out of money for drugs, they would drink the water in the bottom of the bong to get high. What seemed like close knit, almost family like togetherness was in fact a boring union of convenience where the conversation was either about the last high or the next high.

As the young man finds out in a “distant country no one gave him anything.” The way back from a “distant country” is the road of forgiveness. The first step on the road of forgiveness is the recognition that the choice made was a wrong choice. The young man in Jesus’ parable does not talk about mistakes or miscalculations. He says “I will arise and I will go to my father and I will say to him, father I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.” Where a “distant country” is the land of lies, falsehoods, and deception, the road of forgiveness is paved with truth. The truth is not always pretty and the truth is sometimes painful, but the truth is always real.

The Prodigal Son said: “I will say to my father, “Father I have sinned against heaven and before you I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” True, obligations and responsibilities come with relationships: being someone’s mother or father; sister or brother; friend or employer; husband or wife; son or daughter comes with

obligations and responsibilities but obligations and responsibilities are the “stuff” of relationships. A true relationship between persons is the realest real there is.

The Father does not wait for his prodigal son but runs to greet him. To the slaves the Father commands: “Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one- and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it. And let us eat and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is now found!” For the Father rings and robes and fatted calves only have value when there is someone to share them with. The Father knows that you cannot have a living relationship with things. A son has returned from a “distant country”, from the land of death, to a land of truth and relationship and life.

You know I learned as a child that fantasy is fun. I still turn on my Goldfinger soundtrack and imagine that I am driving too fast thru the Alps, but fantasy is not reality. It is attractive but it is not true. If you try to live in fantasy you will die. Sin beckons you to leave the life of living relationship and to move to a “distant county” of illusion without substance. The life God has given you is one of relationship to others. “To love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.” Love and relationship lay obligation and responsibility upon you, but love and relationship also bring you life. It is infinitely better to live a minute in truth than to die for all eternity in illusion and fantasy in a “distant country”. Amen.