

**Reflection on the Gospel-4th Sunday of Lent Year C
(Luke 15:1-3, 11-32)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Parent-child conflict is part of life and every parent's dream is to be able to deal effectively and lovingly with children behaving badly, including adult or adolescent children. Unfailing forgiveness and arms open to welcome back wayward sons and daughters: that is the way proposed in today's gospel story.

There is no room in the hearts of Jesus' critics for such forgiveness: upright law-abiding people should exclude "sinners" from their company. In a first-century Jewish context, it was easy enough to be a sinner. Whole groups of people, depending on their occupation, fell into that category simply because they failed to observe one or more of the 618 prescriptions of the law. Jesus' response to critics is the story of a parent both of whose sons lose their way for a time. One son finds his way back to the centre of family life and the support of the wider community while the other more law-abiding son seems to place himself outside the family circle, holding on to the resentment he feels at his brother's return.

We need to fill in the gaps in the story: there may be daughters as well as sons; there is surely another parent, a mother who shares the heartache of her husband when their younger son requests his one-third share of the estate. To make such a request in this context is unthinkable: it is tantamount to wishing his parents were dead. To accede to such a request is likewise unthinkable, even shameful in that society. The head of a patriarchal household who acts thus stands to lose honour, status, and authority. [It is important to note that the older brother is not disadvantaged: he is assured of a two-thirds share according to the law as well as the ongoing love and support of his family, as his father makes clear].

When things turn out disastrously in the distant country, the younger man shows no real interest in a restored relationship with his family. Rather, he devises a plan that will put food in his empty belly-not a particularly lofty motive for returning home. He thinks up a speech about sharing the status of the family employees. Thanks to the expansive heart of an amazingly compassionate parent, he does not have to deliver the speech he has prepared, but is gathered into the heart of family and local community. That's how it needs to be with us. It is certainly how it is with our merciful God. We can abandon, even betray; our motives for returning home can be very mixed; we may even be like the unwelcoming older brother; but the God of mercy and compassion is always there for us.