

Back in 1999 I was a Parochial Vicar at St. Charles Borromeo in Tacoma. One Sunday, during the Pastor's vacation (and feeling nervous at the responsibility for the whole parish), I was offering the 10:00 mass when I began to feel peculiar. (I think I've mentioned this incident before). During the homily I had trouble breathing. I actually stopped the homily, telling the congregation that I wasn't feeling well. During the Eucharistic Prayer things got worse. It felt like I was going insane. My heart was racing. Somehow, I made it through mass. But at the end of mass a parishioner who is a doctor came up to me. He asked some questions – and basically said, "I think you have had a panic attack."

I didn't know what that even meant. But after seeing another doctor Monday morning I learned all about anxiety – I realized that that was me. I suffer from an anxiety disorder. I had never thought of that as applying to me. I had, of course, heard about anxiety, but I didn't give it much thought. If I thought about it at all, it was something mentally ill people dealt with – and I wasn't one of those people.

In our Gospel we heard of the Prodigal Son. Today I want to preach about the reaction of the Elder Brother as he comes in from the fields that evening. He shows no pleasure at hearing his younger brother is back. In fact, in the parable he never uses the word “brother.” He has nothing but contempt for him – and anger for the Father who celebrates his return. I know that many of us understand the older brother’s feelings. Where’s the justice, we think?

But I want to think about what’s missing from the older brother’s response to the music. As Fr. Anthony Giambrone has said in a Lenten reflection, the “elder brother . . . cannot attune his spirits to the lively music and dancing, because he never grieved his brother’s loss (only his return).” From his behavior, it seems probable that the younger son was never as diligent and responsible as the older son. What do you think the older brother thought when his younger left home? Anger? Relief? Contempt? What attitudes had built up in the older brother as they lived so closely together over the years?

Can't you imagine the older brother judging his sibling's sins? Good riddance! His words to the Father seem mentally rehearsed and long-chewed on. "All these years I served you and never once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fatten calf."

There is an apathy towards the sinner's condition that is freezing his heart cold. He stands out in the dark – listening to music he won't enjoy. His is like the Pharisees and scribes' attitude towards the tax collectors and sinners at the beginning of the parable. The older son ignored the suffering of sinners -- not realizing that he is one of them.

I think of my experience of anxiety, not that mental illness is sin – but it does bear a social stigma. "I'm not one of those people." I have so much more empathy for people with anxiety disorders now. Before my experience of panic attacks and recognition of my own disorder, I didn't think about those who suffered from this – or if I did, I was dismissive.

“Just get a grip, snowflake!” It’s different now. I can imagine their suffering and helplessness. So it is with sin. How many of us are older brothers – and sisters -- who, though we may admit to our own laundered list of minor foibles, have contempt for those big sinners who have disappointed and wronged us?

The older brother doesn’t rejoice at the return of his younger brother because he seems unable to imagine what a lost and sin-filled soul feels and suffers, or what liberation from sin feels like, never having been freed from his own sin. He has never grieved his brother’s sins, so why celebrate his brother’s repentance? How can we rejoice at the sinner’s return whom we never missed when he left?

One part of the adventure of discipleship is realizing that other people are on their own adventures too – and those journeys are just as difficult as our own. And that includes their committing sins. One measure of our own spiritual growth is truly seeing our own sins and using that humbling self-knowledge as the basis for compassion for

other sinners. (I am one of those people!) And we know that growth has taken place is when the conversion of another sinner brings us joy.

Do spiritual conversion stories bring you any joy?

Who are people in our lives – some very close to us – whom we perhaps subconsciously view with contempt or anger because of their sins? To whom do we need to re-learn how to say, “brother” or “sister”? The music will keep playing with or without us, but why stand out in the dark? Why not accept the Father’s mercy and enter the celebration? Lent is a graced time for coming to know our own sins, and for our repentance and conversion – re-entering into the Father’s house. Our Lenten Penance Service is this Wednesday at 7:00. Come to it – or to any of our confession times (Weekdays 8:00 – 8:30, Friday nights 6:00 – 7:00 and Saturday afternoons 3:30 – 4:30). Experience the Father’s forgiveness of your own sins – and, just as important, celebrate the return of so many of your brothers and sisters who are doing the same thing this season.