

Homily
24OrdC
Sept. 11, 2016

This morning, I want to use the story of the prodigal son from today's Gospel as a basis for talking about leadership.

If I asked you, each of you, "Are you a leader?" some of you, maybe most of you, would say "No."

Maybe some of you are not leaders in some formal, official capacity. But every one of you is a leader. Every one of you, no matter how young you are, or how old you are, or what your situation in life is. You are all leaders.

How is this so?

Think of it this way.

Every one of you has an influence on every environment in which you find yourself, whether at home, school, work, church or wherever. Wherever you are present, you have an impact on the mood, the atmosphere, the chemistry, whatever you want to call it.

If you weren't present, the atmosphere would be different. But because you are there, you create something unique about the feeling in the group.

We've all experienced this at the family dinner table. The mood, the atmosphere, depends on who's present and who isn't.

Your influence on the environment you're in does not necessarily depend on what you say or what you do.

I have a friend, Kim, who is quiet and reserved. She likes to be in the background and let other people do the talking.

A few years ago, Kim joined me in a discussion in a small town in Oklahoma with about 20 people from the town. We were talking about the needs of the youth in this small community. Kim and I did not know any of the 20 other people before the meeting started.

Kim said absolutely nothing during the meeting. But when the meeting was over, 3 different people from the town came up to me and asked, nodding towards Kim, "Who is that woman?" She had influenced the meeting by her very presence, without saying a word.

If you never heard of Mother Teresa, knew nothing about her, and had no idea what she looked like, but she was sitting right here in this church at this moment, she would have an impact on the atmosphere at this Mass.

That reminds me that one of my children, when she was around 10 or 11 years old, said one Sunday when we were on the way home from Mass in another parish, "You can tell most people don't want to be there."

Every one of us contributes to the atmosphere in this church, and in every place we go.

We either have a positive impact, we lift up those around us, or we have a negative influence, creating a drag on the atmosphere. It all depends on who we really are, what's in our hearts, what our attitude is.

So let's look at the prodigal son in today's Gospel and see what kind of leader he was in two of the circumstances in which he found himself.

After the prodigal son received his inheritance, the Gospel says that he went off to a distant land and spent all his inheritance on a life of dissipation.

Dissipation means a life of drunkenness and sexual promiscuity, debauchery.

During the time of his life of dissipation, what kind of influence do you think the prodigal son had on the people around him? Do you think he lifted them up, gave them a sense of true joy, inspired them in some positive way?

No. He would have been an example of negative leadership.

Now, after the prodigal son had returned to his father, had been forgiven, and his father had embraced him and kissed him and ordered a huge celebration, what kind of leader do you think he was then?

Very, very positive. Radiating joy, liberation, love and the deepest happiness. It would have been a special blessing for anyone to have been in his presence.

It's the same way with each of us.

There is no such thing as private sin, sin which is just between us and God. As the prodigal son said to his father, "I have sinned against heaven AND AGAINST YOU."

All sin is contagious. Our sin affects everything we do. Our sin affects the people around us. It sets in motion a negative power. We may not be aware of this, but it's very true. And this principle does apply to sins which are popular, so the fact that other people are doing the same thing is no help at all.

As long as there is any unresolved, unforgiven sin in our lives, our positive impact on the people around us will be limited. We will not be the leaders that God wants us to be.

Until we are liberated from our sin, there will always be something holding us back in our lives, something keeping us from the deeper joy, the deeper freedom, that God wants for us.

The only way for us to be the leaders that God calls us to be is to seek out the Father, tell him what we've done, and ask for His forgiveness. Then we will experience the joy, the liberation, the exhilaration, experienced by the prodigal son.

And it is then that the celebration can begin.