One of the deep meanings of this Gospel reading is signaled in verse 2: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Last Sunday, Jesus challenged the people to realize they were no better than those they condemned. The Pharisees and scribes had trouble with that lesson. They felt morally superior and more entitled to God’s favor than those whose lives they questioned. Jesus turned that attitude on its head, showing time and again that God seeks out the sinner and the lost, particularly those who recognize that they are sinners and lost. As long as the Pharisees and scribes did not see themselves that way, Jesus could not help them.

Dictionary.com Unabridged says prodigal means “wastefully or recklessly extravagant,” so someone who is prodigal is lavish, a spendthrift. According to the Pharisees, Jesus was prodigal, for they considered his welcome of sinners as wildly wasteful, frittering away time and resources on people they thought were unworthy. But Jesus simply was showing them, and all of us, what God’s love is like. God is extravagant in his love for saints and sinners alike. To some it might seem pointless or unjust to love and care for sinners and enemies, but God finds no one unworthy or unlovable—even those who reject him and oppress others.

Lent is a time to accept our sinfulness, our lost condition, and return home to the Father. Like the father of the prodigal son, God waits for that warm embrace, willing to give us everything. Hurry now.

MARY KATHARINE DELEY
sundaybulletin@liguori.org