

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fortieth Verse of the third Chapter of the Lamentations of Jeremiah.³

“... Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the LORD. Let us lift up our heart with our hands unto God in the heavens. We have transgressed and have rebelled: thou hast not pardoned. Thou hast covered with anger, and persecuted us: thou hast slain, thou hast not pitied. Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through. Thou hast made us as the offscouring and refuse in the midst of the people. All our enemies have opened their mouths against us. Fear and a snare is come upon us, desolation and destruction. Mine eye runneth down with rivers of water for the destruction of the daughter of my people. Mine eye trickleth down, and ceaseth not, without any intermission, Till the LORD look down, and behold from heaven. Mine eye affecteth mine heart because of all the daughters of my city. Mine enemies chased me sore, like a bird, without cause. They have cut off my life in the dungeon, and cast a stone upon me. Waters flowed over mine head; then I said, I am cut off.

“I called upon thy name, O LORD, out of the low dungeon. Thou hast heard my voice: hide not thine ear at my breathing, at my cry. Thou drewest near in the day that I called upon thee: thou saidst, Fear not. O Lord, thou hast pleaded the causes of my soul; thou hast redeemed my life.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the fifteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.⁴

“And he said, A certain man had two sons: and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy liv-

ing with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: ““Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Introduction:

I had two problems in preparing a sermon to preach to you this morning. One was, and is, that the parable of the Prodigal Son is one of those iconic passages from Scripture that is so familiar to all Christians that it is extremely difficult to come up with something new to say about it. So I had to comfort myself with the observation that, when one is dealing with Scripture, the truth of which never varies, perhaps newness is not necessarily an entirely good thing. The preacher, then, must try to find a new way of saying the same old things.

The other problem with this passage was, and is, that instructors in homiletics ram home to their students the point that a sermon should not address more than three points, because that is all that can be absorbed by listeners who have before them no blackboard illustrations, no power point slides, and no lecture outlines, so they must depend totally on hearing and memory to carry anything away from the sermon.

But I find no fewer than five points in this parable that seem to deserve being underlined, all equally important, and I could not bring myself to favor three of those five at the expense of the other two. So I must ask you to bear with me and hope that if I make each of those five points very short, together they will not add up to more than we can usefully handle together.

Development:

1. This Gospel story is a parable, and a parable is a metaphor for the Kingdom of God.

One of the unique qualities of Jesus's parables is that each of them is essentially a single metaphor, designed to convey only a single meaning,⁶ and that meaning is always some teaching about the Kingdom of God.⁷ Nevertheless, these parables are so vivid and so well grounded in the daily lives of our Lord's hearers, that it is irresistible to take notice of some of the implications of the particular people and situations that appear in those stories.

2. When the younger son, in his pride and arrogance, thought he could depend solely on his own resources, he quickly discovered that they were insufficient. So instead of having everything he needed, he had nothing.

As today's Second Lesson tells us about the younger son, "And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine."⁸ For an orthodox Jew, there could not possibly be a greater debasement than that: just to touch a pig renders one ritually unclean, unfit to participate in the normal exercises of worship; actually to care for pigs is simply unthinkable.

breasts, or will we be like the younger, recognizing the errors of our ways and humbly begging the forgiveness of those whom we have offended?

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister, JD²¹
August 21, 2011.

¹ "Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening." *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Lamentations 3:40-58 (KJV).

⁴ St. Luke 15:11-end (KJV).

⁵ St. Luke 15:31b-32 (RSV).

⁶ *Robert H. Stein, Parables*, in BRUCE M. METZGER AND MICHAEL D. COOGAN, EDs., *THE OXFORD COMPANION TO THE BIBLE* 569 (Oxford University Press 1993).

⁷ *Ibid.* at 568.

⁸ St. Luke 15:14-15 (RSV).

⁹ What she actually said was, "The problem with socialism is that sooner or later you run out of other people's money."

¹⁰ St. Matthew 25:1-13.

¹¹ Luke 15:20b (RSV).

¹² St. Matthew 20:1-16.

¹³ St. Luke 14:18.

¹⁴ St. Luke 15:26:28a (RSV).

¹⁵ St. Matthew 20:1-16.

¹⁶ St. Luke 18:9-14.

¹⁷ I Corinthians 10:12 (RSV).

¹⁸ St. Luke 15:31-32 (RSV).

¹⁹ St. Luke 15:3-7; St. Matthew 12-14.

²⁰ St. Luke 15:18-10.

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ives all who return to him, not just those we think should be acceptable to Him.

There is an extension of that same point that is touched on in today's Second Lesson when the father speaks to the frustrated elder son: "And he said unto him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"¹⁸

This recalls two parables, one of which is the lost sheep¹⁹ for whom the shepherd does not cease searching until they are found and over whose recovery he rejoices. The other is the very similar account of the lost coin²⁰ for which the woman of the house searches high and low until she finds it, and then rushes to tell her neighbors of her success.

The point of all these passages of Scripture is, of course, that God is always joyful when one of His own returns to him, no matter how late in the day that return may be. And for those of us who think we have labored longer and harder for Him, well at least we have the satisfaction of knowing that our relationship with Him has never been in peril the way those of the latecomers were until they reformed themselves.

Conclusion:

So, in the end, the question before each of us is which figure in today's parable we choose as the model for our own behavior. Although the loving father is really a metaphor for God, nevertheless we can choose to emulate Him by accepting the sincere repentance of all who have harmed us and by rejoicing in their return to the ways of virtue.

And, as between the other two figures, the two brothers, the choice is stark: will we be like the self-satisfied, prideful elder brother, clasping our resentments to our own

So, clearly, this younger son had thought he could manage entirely on his own, without the support of his father and family – at least, he could after he had received by anticipation the inheritance that he had never actually earned – and without social, familial, and religious infrastructure provided by his community of origin.

However, it did not take him long to learn the same point that was made by Margaret, Lady Thatcher, the former British Prime Minister, when she said the problem with depending on other people's resources for our needs is that sooner or later those resources are exhausted, leaving us with nothing.⁹ By relying solely on himself, he quickly became destitute, in an obvious metaphor for our natural state of existential despair and hopelessness. The only cure for that despair and hopelessness is supernatural, and we obtain that cure when we, like the repentant wastrel, are received back home.

We see something of this same teaching about careless self-reliance in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.¹⁰ There, the five bridal attendants who relied on their original estimates of how long it would take for the bridegroom to arrive for the wedding ran out of lamp oil and when the groom and his party arrived, they were off trying to buy more after the shops had closed. The other five attendants took a more realistic view of their own personal powers and therefore allowed for the contingency of error in their calculations. Thus they had a reserve oil supply and so were present when the groom and the groomsmen arrived, ready to light them into the feast.

As has long been wisely said, when we are confronted with difficult or prolonged tasks, we should work as though success depends solely on us and pray as though success depends solely on God.

3. Fortunately for us, God our Father forgives us our pride and arrogance, our attempts to do without Him, and is always ready to receive us back to Him.

As today's Second Lesson tells us, "But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him."¹¹ In other words, God never turns away those who repent of their offenses against Him and turn to him with the intention of amending their erring lives.

This is one of the points our Lord made in the parable of the workers in the vineyard.¹² No matter how recent people's conversions may be, no matter how short the time they have spent pursuing the Lord's business rather than their own, He still treats them as though they had been struggling at His side their lives long.

Something of the same point is made in the parable of the wedding feast.¹³ Even the favored people who receive early invitations do not all place sufficient value on the opportunity they have been given, so some of them exclude themselves from God's company. And even if one is not among the guests originally expected to be among those attending, God makes room for other late-comers. It is never too late to join God's group of intimate friends.

4. Like the elder brother, it is easy for us to resent God's limitless mercy when it is extended to others whom we think do not deserve it.

Of course, we should be concerned only with our own prospects for salvation and should not worry about how God will deal with other people. But that is a counsel of perfection; one of the unpleasant little kinks in human nature is our resentment of others who receive the same blessings we

do but who, in our eyes, do not deserve them as much as we do. As today's Second Lesson tells us about the elder son, "And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in."¹⁴

To me, this is very reminiscent of the first-hired workers in the parable of the vineyard to which we have already referred.¹⁵ Before, we were considering the initial anxiety of the ones who missed out on getting jobs in the morning and who were only hired late in the day; now we must look at the resentment of those others, who had been hired in the morning and so had the assurance of paid employment that day. They had worked all day and received their agreed wages but they thought that for just that reason they should receive proportionately more compensation than did the late-comers.

But it also has some of the flavor of the Pharisee in our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the publican.¹⁶ You will recall how he stood in the Temple, looking down on the tax collector who humbly crouched behind him, and thanked God that he was not as lesser men are; clearly, he was in need of St. Paul's warning to the Corinthians in today's Epistle at Mass: "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."¹⁷

When we consider our own salvation, we must be very careful not to put ourselves on any pedestals or to think that we are somehow more deserving than others who, to our eyes, have not displayed as much Christian commitment as we have. Our eyes are not God's eyes and His see both farther and deeper than do ours.

5. Out of that same limitless mercy upon which we ourselves must depend, God rece-