

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYERⁱ
The Ninth Sunday after Trinityⁱⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fortieth Verse of the third Chapter of the Lamentations of Jeremiah.^{iv}

“... 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.^v

“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 living 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.^{vi} 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.

Introduction:

Today's Second Lesson comes at the end of a series of three well-known parables, in each of which our Lord uses the image of something lost: first a lost sheep, then a lost coin, and finally the lost son. In these

parables, God, who actually has need of nothing, is depicted as suffering loss—the loss of one of His beloved creatures.

Theme:

To get a full understanding of these parables, we must consider what theologians call “God’s *Impassibility*”. “Impassibility” simply means “without passion” but in this context, “passion” does not mean “emotion”. Rather, it means “suffering”, in the same sense as we refer to Christ’s death on the Cross as “the Passion of Our Lord”, and is closely related to the adjective “impassive”.

Homily:

We have three characters in today’s parable of the Prodigal Son, and the most important of them is the father. It is the love of this father that remains the most important lesson. He is shown in such a way as to give us the true picture of God’s impassibility, because his love is constant, never destroyed, never diminished, always present. Because we think of love in strictly emotional terms, that is emotion with or without abiding commitment, we think of changes and reactions as part of what it must be. Not so the love of God. The father in the parable is patient, quick to forgive and completely gracious because nothing changes him.

When the prodigal returns to his father’s house, he finds that the return itself is sufficient for him to receive forgiveness, because the father does not base his love on reaction, or on whims. If we believe that the love of God is based upon how He feels at the present moment, then we do not understand the Cross. The forgiveness of sins can be anticipated with hopeful expectation because Jesus Christ died for all of our sins, and “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”^{vii} If we understand that mercy or judgment depend on where we stand, because both were present on the Cross, then God’s impassibility becomes a great comfort, and His love becomes our certain hope and expectation.

Another character is the elder brother, the one who does not know that he, too, is a sinner. Neither does he care that his bitterness grieves

his father, because, after all, he is right. Right, that is, in that he is correct. If ever we forget that everything we do in Church is all about the Father's love for sinners (including ourselves), we become the elder brother. In every Holy Communion service we quote Saint Paul in the Comfortable Words: "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*" The elder brother takes many forms, and that includes the forms he takes among people like ourselves. I have been present in services where people seemed more concerned with a performance than they were with worshiping God in spirit and in truth. Infinitely more important than getting all the details right, such as which candles to light first, is remembering why we are here to begin with.

Everything we hear from God's Word, and every sacrament we receive, is all because Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. The elder brother is not capable of obeying the words of Saint Paul, "*Do the work of an evangelist.*" He cannot do this work, because he is so very correct about how unworthy the younger brother is; he would never have sought for his lost brother. And, because of this, his heart is far from that of his father. He cannot make merry because joy depends upon love. And to understand his father, he would have to be filled with the love that forgives and restores.

Finally, we must consider the prodigal son himself. Anyone who cannot identify with this repentant sinner (as his elder brother was unable to do) wallows in self-deception because, as the Beloved Disciple wrote: "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*"^{viii} In order to learn about sin, I did not really need a textbook in Seminary. All I ever needed was to look in the mirror. Like Count Dracula, some people do not look in the mirror, and could not see their reflections even if they did. What is the mirror but the word of God, the perfect Law of liberty that James tells us we *must* look into?^{ix} The laver in which the priests cleansed themselves before entering the Holy Place was made of mirrors, all of which helped them to wash. Look into God's word, and let the truth convict you of your own sins.

When I teach people about Confession and Absolution, I tell them that they must remember that Christ is the Advocate for us but we appear before a priest (and *the* Priest Himself as well) to make confession as witnesses for the prosecution. Without excuses, without sugar-coating, we must testify against ourselves, and let the love of the Father come through to us by way of this sacrament of Absolution, a sacrament of Christ's own priesthood manifested through an ordained man. We must learn to identify with the prodigal son, to be able to say, *"I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son."*

"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." In other words, spoken through the priest, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And by His authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." So too, with the General Confession and Absolution for "all who truly turn to him."

Saint Paul tells us that we are all called to become saints.^x What Saint Paul told the Christians in Corinth and Rome (and by extension to all Christians everywhere throughout time) was that they were called to become saints, because holiness of life is a vocation for every Christian.

But, unless we first identify with the prodigal son, we haven't a snowflake's chance in "the other place" of becoming saints. Thinking now about the elder brother more than the younger one; we must know (each one of us) that we are called to become saints; but seeing the terrible truth in the mirror of God's word, we must be willing to appear for the prosecution in order to receive the grace of forgiveness. The joy of sin-forgiveness creates charity; and this love, in turn, creates motivation to do the work of an evangelist.

The Rev'd Robert Hart^{xi}
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ⁱ “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).

ⁱⁱ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Mass on the Ninth Sunday after Trinity, 2011.

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

^{iv} *Lamentations* 3:40-58 (KJV).

^v *St. Luke* 15:11-end (KJV).

^{vi} *Because the younger son had already received his inheritance by anticipation.*

^{vii} *I John* 2:2 (KJV).

^{viii} *I John* 1:8-10 (KJV).

^{ix} *James* 1:22-25.

^x *I Corinthians* 1 and *Romans* 1.

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