

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^{vi} 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.^{vii} 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.^{viii} 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: *"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.”^{ix} In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Redemption does not come from within us; it can only come from without. Today’s Second Lesson is about redemption, redemption offered freely by God the Father. This redemption is not earned, nor deserved, but is an act of love. It is God’s response to repentance from sin. Obtaining it requires only that we ask.

Our Lord was trying to explain to His followers—and to the Pharisees who came to hear Him—that forgiveness of sin is the act of God: *“I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”*^x God wants to forgive, He wants us to see the errors of our ways when we stray, and He wants us to return to Him. And as the father in the parable, Heaven is joyful when sinners repent and return to God.

Consider the sins which the prodigal son has committed.

Greed, in his lust for the wealth of his father and in his impertinent demand, *“Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.”* Not *“Please give to me that which you would give to me,”* but a demand for *“that which falleth to me.”* Someone who is prodigal is guilty of wasteful and extravagant spending.

Gluttony, the “loose living” of the story. The prodigal son fills his days with food, drink, women, and the other enticements of a worldly life that we can just imagine. But his good times, such as they were, came to an end when his money came to an end. The money ran out and what had been a carefree life, in which he did not have to toil, or earn, or concern himself with where the next meal might come from, turned into a grind of hunger, poverty and dearth.

His brother, meanwhile, stayed at home and devoted himself to the farm and to his father. The brother’s life, while not perhaps as

adventurous as the prodigal's, was one of safety, of comfort and the company of his father.

The father in this tale represents God the Father, of course, and the two sons represent, respectively, believers and sinners. Both are children of God, yet they are allowed to make their own decisions.

The older son is dutiful, if humorless, and obedient. The younger is full of pride. He is convinced that he knows more than does his father (almost a textbook definition of many kinds of sin) and that he does not need his father's guidance, support and love.

The prodigal was tired of the order and discipline in the father's home and wanted to throw aside the bands of control that existed there. He was unable to see that as he grew in the home of his father, he would come to inherit all of the benefits to be had there, not just some smaller part.

But his abandoning that discipline proved to be his ruin, not his freedom. As many who do not have the control that maturity brings, he threw away all that he had on foolish things.

Our society is rife with examples of the same behavior. We are always surprised to hear of professional athletes who, during their sports careers, were paid millions of dollars but who, only a few years after the end of those careers, are bankrupt. Some years ago, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* carried a story about a former professional football player, once a star of the New Orleans Saints team, who was found living under a highway bridge. Similarly, it is not uncommon to read of people who won big lottery jackpots, only to end up worse off than they were before receiving those "winnings".

The sinner in his separation from God misspends time and chance, ending up destitute and in misery. As the prodigal son in today's parable finally ends up performing the miserable and disgraceful work of feeding swine, without even as much to feed himself as the food given to the swine, so sinners end up serving evil and without honor.

In this situation there remains but one choice. Like the prodigal in the parable, the sinner must finally return to God and beg forgiveness if he is to avoid death. If he does not, he risks death of spirit, death of body and death of soul. But if he will repent, turn from his sinful ways and return to God, then God and all the Angels in heaven will rejoice. On this we have our Lord's word.

Sadly, most humans, being pain-motivated as we are, will not turn from sin until we are at our last extremity. It is a sad reality that most people will not make changes in their lives until it is simply too painful not to do so any longer. Thus the prodigal son had to fall into his worst state before he would consider humbling himself by returning to his father. Our Lord says he was starving, unable even to obtain the food given to swine. At that point, all his pride, all his conceit, all his honor had been stripped from him.

"I will arise and go to my father," the prodigal decides, but not return as a son. Instead, he will return and beg his father's forgiveness and his permission to stay on the family homestead in the place of a servant rather than that he has forfeited, as a member of the family. *"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."*

Imagine the shame of this entreaty: *"I am no more worthy to be called thy son."* But just as the father in the parable was quick to forgive, so too is our heavenly Father quick to forgive us. As the erring son came slowly back to face his father, his father, seeing him from a great distance, had compassion and ran to greet him. He embraced his son, who he had considered lost and, despite the way the son had conducted himself, the father welcomed him home. Our Lord says the father kissed his returning son, had a fine robe placed on him, shoes on his feet, a ring on his finger, and ordered a celebration.

This seems very confusing to us, with our limited human notions of fairness and justice. Why did the father not at least have the son serve for a time as a farmhand, "to teach him a lesson"? Why did he not rebuke his son for his evil ways? Why did he not make comparisons

between this prodigal son and his older son who never left and was a devoted son and a hard worker?

Our reactions are much like those of the older son, who protests what seems to be the unfair preference given his wasteful, sinful younger brother: *“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.”*

God’s answer, just like that of the two brother’s father, is forgiveness. *“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.”*

Even if we do not understand how God could forgive some things, we should give thanks that He does. Any of us could find ourselves in that place where we deeply need His forgiveness. During the week, I work in a jail, where every day I see people who have done things I cannot imagine being forgiven for. But this forgiveness comes from God, with whom all things are possible. Even the heartless, abandoned gangster who was crucified with Our Lord, who must have been one of the vilest criminals in human history,^{xi} but who, at the very last moment, felt remorse, was forgiven.

Redemption must always come from God and does always come from God.

Let us pray:

Lord, we are so often like the prodigal son, spurning Your gracious care and home in favor of temporary pleasures. Help us to understand that these can never fulfill nor give true happiness. Instead, bring us always back to You with Your chastening, loving hand. When we are quick to judge others, teach us as the father in the parable teaches to rejoice when a sinner returns to You. Let us find true joy as the lost are found and returned to You, remembering that all these are our brothers

and sisters in You. This we ask in the name of our only Advocate and Mediator, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

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The Rev. Mr. Larry Wagoner, MSW^{xii}

August 5, 2012

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 Holy Communion on the Ninth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

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} According to Jewish custom, where the father had two sons, the share of the younger would have been one-third.

^{vii} This was about as menial a task as an ancient Jew could have imagined, for devout Jews refused to have anything to do with swine, even to own them, let alone raise or feed them.

^{viii} By the Jewish custom of the time, the inheritance of the eldest son was twice that of each of the other sons, or in this case, the whole two-thirds portion that remained from the father’s original estate after the prodigal had received (by anticipation) his one-third share.

^{ix} St. Luke 15:31 (RSV).

^x St. Luke 15:7 (RSV).

^{xi} The Romans almost never crucified ordinary criminals, no matter how heinous their crimes. They were sold into slavery in the state-owned mines, or in the navy’s galleys, or as gladiators in the arena, all fates that assured their ultimate deaths but in the meantime made the state a profit. Only political criminals were crucified, as an example and warning to others who might threaten the security of the state. So the two criminals who were crucified with Christ must have been almost unimaginably evil men to have incurred that unusual punishment.

^{xii} Deacon, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church, serving Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune, MS, and Christ Church Anglican Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Metairie, LA.