

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Fourth Sunday in Lent¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-third Chapter of the First Book of Moses, called Genesis.³

“And the famine was sore in the land. And it came to pass, when they had eaten up the corn which they had brought out of Egypt, their father said unto them, Go again, buy us a little food. And Judah spake unto him, saying, The man did solemnly protest unto us, saying, Ye shall not see my face, except your brother be with you. If thou wilt send our brother with us, we will go down and buy thee food: But if thou wilt not send him, we will not go down: for the man said unto us, Ye shall not see my face, except your brother be with you. And Israel said, Wherefore dealt ye so ill with me, as to tell the man whether ye had yet a brother? And they said, The man asked us straitly of our state, and of our kindred, saying, Is your father yet alive? have ye another brother? and we told him according to the tenor of these words: could we certainly know that he would say, Bring your brother down? And Judah said unto Israel his father, Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go; that we may live, and not die, both we, and thou, and also our little ones. I will be surety for him; of my hand shalt thou require him: if I bring him not unto thee, and set him before thee, then let me bear the blame for ever: For except we had lingered, surely now we had returned this second time. And their father Israel said unto them, If it must be so now, do this; take of the best fruits in the land in your vessels, and carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts, and almonds: And take double money in your hand; and the money that was brought again in the mouth of your sacks, carry it again in your hand; peradventure it was an oversight: Take also your brother, and arise, go again unto the man: And God Almighty give you mercy before the man, that

he may send away your other brother, and Benjamin. If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.

“And the men took that present, and they took double money in their hand and Benjamin; and rose up, and went down to Egypt, and stood before Joseph. And when Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the ruler of his house, Bring these men home, and slay, and make ready; for these men shall dine with me at noon. And the man did as Joseph bade; and the man brought the men into Joseph’s house. And the men were afraid, because they were brought into Joseph’s house; and they said, Because of the money that was returned in our sacks at the first time are we brought in; that he may seek occasion against us, and fall upon us, and take us for bondmen, and our asses. And they came near to the steward of Joseph’s house, and they communed with him at the door of the house, And said, O sir, we came indeed down at the first time to buy food: And it came to pass, when we came to the inn, that we opened our sacks, and, behold, every man’s money was in the mouth of his sack, our money in full weight: and we have brought it again in our hand. And other money have we brought down in our hands to buy food: we cannot tell who put our money in our sacks. And he said, Peace be to you, fear not: your God, and the God of your father, hath given you treasure in your sacks: I had your money. And he brought Simeon out unto them. And the man brought the men into Joseph’s house, and gave them water, and they washed their feet; and he gave their asses provender. And they made ready the present against Joseph came at noon: for they heard that they should eat bread there.

“And when Joseph came home, they brought him the present which was in their hand into the house, and bowed themselves to him to the earth. And he asked them of their welfare, and said, Is your father well, the old man of whom ye spake? Is he yet alive? And they answered, Thy servant our father is in good health, he is yet alive. And they bowed down their heads, and made obeisance. And he lifted up his eyes, and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother’s son, and said, Is this your younger brother, of whom ye spake unto me? And he said, God be gracious unto thee, my son. And Joseph made haste; for

his bowels did yearn upon his brother: and he sought where to weep; and he entered into his chamber, and wept there. And he washed his face, and went out, and refrained himself, and said, Set on bread. And they set on for him by himself, and for them by themselves, and for the Egyptians, which did eat with him, by themselves: because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrews; for that is an abomination unto the Egyptians. And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birth-right, and the youngest according to his youth: and the men marvelled one at another. And he took and sent messes unto them from before him: but Benjamin's mess was five times so much as any of their's. And they drank, and were merry with him."

Or,

Here beginneth the thirtieth Verse of the twenty-seventh Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus.⁴

"Malice and wrath, even these are abominations; and the sinful man shall have them both.

"He that revengeth shall find vengeance from the Lord, and he will surely keep his sins in remembrance. Forgive thy neighbour the hurt that he hath done unto thee, so shall thy sins also be forgiven when thou prayest. One man beareth hatred against another, and doth he seek pardon from the Lord? He sheweth **[SHOW-eth]** no mercy to a man, which is like himself: and doth he ask forgiveness of his own sins? If he that is but flesh nourish hatred, who will intreat for pardon of his sins? Remember thy end, and let enmity cease; remember corruption and death, and abide in the commandments. Remember the commandments, and bear no malice to thy neighbour: remember the covenant of the Highest, and wink at ignorance. Abstain from strife, and thou shalt diminish thy sins: for a furious man will kindle strife, A sinful man disquieteth friends, and maketh debate among them that be at peace."

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the fifteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.⁵

“Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.

“And he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth her friends and her neighbours together, saying, Rejoice with me; for I have found the piece which I had lost. Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.

“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

out 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-forgiven creates charity; and this love, in turn, creates motivation to do the work of an evangelist.

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The Rev’d Robert Hart¹¹
August 21, 2011

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Mass on the Ninth Sunday after Trinity, 2011.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 35 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxviii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (CIPBC 1963).

³ Genesis 43:1-end (KJV).

⁴ *Ecclesiasticus* 27:30—28:9 (KJV).

⁵ St. Luke 15:1-end (KJV).

⁶ Because the younger son had already received his inheritance by anticipation.

⁷ I John 2:2 (KJV).

⁸ I John 1:8-10 (KJV).

⁹ James 1:22-25.

¹⁰ I Corinthians 1 and Romans 1.

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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?⁹ 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.¹⁰ What Saint Paul told the Christians in Corinth and Rome (and by extension to all Christians everywhere through-

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.⁶ 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 is comprised 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, 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.”⁷ 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.*”⁸ In order to