

Sermon for Trinity 9

Our second lesson brings us the familiar account of the prodigal son.

“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.”

Redemption does not come from within us; it can only come from God. Our second reading today from Luke is about redemption, redemption that is freely offered by God the Father. The redemption that is talked about is not earned, nor is it deserved, but comes from an act of love. It is God’s response to repentance from our sin. Obtaining this redemption only requires 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 an act of God.

“I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.”

God wants to forgive, He wants us to see the errors in our ways when we stray, He wants us to return to Him and remember how He wants us to live. Like the father in the parable, Heaven is joyful when sinners repent and return to God.

Let us consider the sins that the prodigal son has committed.

First one on the list is Greed. In his lust for the wealth of his father and in his petulant demand. He is greedy and entitled.

“Father give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.”

Not, “Please father give me that which you wish me to have” but rather a demand for “that which falleth to me.” Someone who is prodigal is guilty of wasteful and extravagant spending.

The sin of gluttony is also revealed in the loose living of the story. The prodigal son fills his days with excessive food, drink, women, and other indulgencies of a worldly life. But his good times, such as they were, came to an end when his money came to an end. His money ran out and what had been a stress free, carefree life in which he did not have to work, or earn money, or even concern himself with where his next meal would come from turned into a daily grind of hunger, poverty, and worry.

His brother, meanwhile, stayed at home and devoted himself to the daily duties of the farm and to his father. The brother’s life, while not perhaps as glamorous or adventurous as the prodigals, was one of safety, comfort, and security. Above all he could enjoy his relationship with his father.

The father in this tale represents our Heavenly Father and the two sons represent, respectively, believers and sinners. Both are children of God, are loved by God but are allowed to make their own decisions.

The older son is dutiful, careful, and obedient. The younger son is full of pride and arrogance. He is convinced that he knows more than does his father which is almost a textbook definition of many kinds of sin. He is convinced that he does not need his father’s guidance, support, or his love.

The prodigal son was tired of the order, rules, and discipline that existed in the father’s home and wanted to throw away these bands of control and the boundaries that went with them. He was unable to see that as he grew in the home of his father, he also grew emotionally and

spiritually. If he was patient and respectful, he would come to inherit all the benefits to be had there. He would inherit all that was there not just some smaller part.

But as the story tells us, his abandoning that discipline and patience proved to be his ruination, not his freedom. As is common among those who do not have the control and focus that maturity brings, he threw away all that he had on foolish things.

Today our society is rife with examples of the same type of behavior. I am always surprised to hear of famous athletes or personalities who, during their careers were paid millions of dollars. Unfortunately, some of them end up bankrupt and have very little to show when their career ends. Similarly, it is not uncommon to hear of people who won big jackpot winnings only to end up worse off than they were before they won big.

The sinner in his separation from God mispends his time and chance and ends up destitute and in misery. As the prodigal son in today's parable, we see him feeding swine, which was perceived at the time as miserable and demeaning work. Even as he toiled in this labor, he was unable to eat even the food given to the swine. The sinner ends up serving evil and lives their life without honor.

In this situation there remains one choice. Like the prodigal son in the parable, the sinner must 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 the death of his soul. But if he honestly and sincerely repents, turns from his evil ways, and returns to serve God, then God and all the Angels in heaven will rejoice. On this we have the promise of our Lord.

Sadly, most humans, being motivated by the pleasure principle, will not turn from sin until they have hit rock bottom, or they have a moment of

clarity. It is a sad reality that most people will not make changes in their lives until it is too painful, or the consequences too grave, to continue and not change. The prodigal son had to fall into his worst state of being before he would even consider humbling himself by returning to his father's house. Our Lord described him as starving, unable even to obtain the food that was fed to the swine. At that point, all his pride, conceit, and honor had been stripped of him and he had nothing.

"I will rise and go to my father ", the prodigal son decides, but not return as his son. Instead, he will return and beg his father's forgiveness and ask for permission to live on the family homestead as a servant rather than the family member status he had forfeited.

"I will rise and go to my father, and I 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 that must have been felt to say the words, "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 for our sins. As the erring son came slowly back to face his father, the father, seeing him from a distance, was filled with compassion and ran to greet him. He embraced his son, who he considered lost, and despite the way his son had conducted himself, he welcomed him home. Our Lord says the father kissed his returning son, had a fine robe placed on him, gave him shoes to wear, and ordered a huge celebration.

This act may seem very confusing to us with our human understanding of fairness and justice. Why did the father not punish his son? At least make him serve for a time as a servant to teach him a lesson and further humble him. 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 was responsible and never left the home?

Our reactions may be much like that of the older son who protests what seems to be an unfair preference given his bothers wasteful, sinful actions.

“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 they son was come, which hath devoured they living with harlots, thou has killed for him the fatted calf.”

God’s answer, like the answer from the two son’s father, is one of 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 a place where we deeply need his forgiveness. As many of you know I have spent my career working in law enforcement, specifically in Parole and Probation. During my career I came into contact with people who have done things that I cannot imagine being forgiven for. One of the things I remember most from my time in law enforcement was when someone asked, “what if we all had to wear the worst thing we have done, our biggest sin, in big letters on our shirt for everyone to see? How would that change how we treat and see others?”

I need to constantly remind myself that this forgiveness comes from God, with whom all things are possible. I also look at my own life, and while I have not necessarily done the things I am judging, my life has not been without sin. The fact that despite my struggles and weakness I am given forgiveness is a miracle and a blessing.

Even the heartless, abandoned criminal who was crucified alongside our Lord, who must have been a vile and loathsome individual, was forgiven when at the very last minute he felt remorse and believed.

Remember that redemption and forgiveness always come from God. Turn away from sin and seek a new life following the commandments of God.

Let us pray together: THE LORD BE WITH YOU

Almighty God, 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 things can never fulfill us or give us true happiness. Instead, bring us always back to You and Your chastening and loving hand. When we are quick to judge others, teach us as the father in the parable teaches that we are 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. Let us seek to forgive others as God has forgiven us. This we ask in the name of our only advocate and mediator, Jesus Christ.
Amen.