

MORNING PRAYER
TENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY
08.13.23

There is always a lot of work to be done on a farm, and on most small farms the work is done by the farmer's family. If the farm is too big or the family is too small, then the farmer will hire people to help with the work.

The same was true in the Israel of Jesus' day. The hired help could be indentured servants or slaves, but they would work side by side with the farmer's sons doing much the same work. The difference was that the slave could be put out at any time, but the sons were part of the household and could not be put out. That is what Jesus meant when he said, "The slave [or servant –it's the same word in Greek] does not continue in the house for ever; [but] the son continues for ever."

The Jews did not consider themselves slaves. "We are Abraham's seed," they said, "and have never been in bondage to any man." That, of course, was patently untrue on the face of it if you think in terms of economics and politics. The Jews had been slaves in Egypt. They had been conquered and enslaved by the Babylonians. They had lived under Macedonian occupation and were even as they spoke under Roman occupation. But the Jewish leaders were not speaking in economic or political terms and neither was Jesus. They were speaking in terms of their relationship to God and their status in the household of God. They were the descendants of Abraham and could not be disinherited, no matter what they did.

I understand that there are people today who take advantage of their status as grown children and live with their parents long after the time when they should be out establishing homes of their own. That's how it is when you are a son or a daughter rather than hired help.

But if a son continues forever and cannot be put out of the house, he can leave of his own accord, and that's really what Jesus is talking about here. You may be a child of the Covenant, a descendant of Abraham, and an heir of God, but you can still sell yourself into bondage and become a slave to sin.

The prodigal son was not thrown out of his father's house. He decided on his own initiative to leave and take his inheritance with him. Then he squandered his inheritance and ended up selling himself as a slave.

His bondage to the foreign landowner was a physical manifestation of the fact that he had previously sold himself as a slave to his passions, wasting his heritage in partying and harlotry. That's what Jesus is saying had happened to the Jews.

They were descendants of Abraham and heirs of Abraham's faith and obedience, but they had squandered that heritage and sold themselves into the bondage of sin. "[E]very one who commits sin is a slave [or servant] to sin", says Jesus.

The Roman occupation was a manifestation of the fact that the Jews had wasted their heritage and sold themselves as slaves to sin. The prophets said the same thing about the seventy years of captivity in Babylon. The only way out of that bondage, was repentance and return to God.

When the prodigal son came to himself, he realized that. He renounced his profligate ways and returned home in great humility, confessing his sins and asking, not to be restored to his former place, but simply to be accepted back into the house. You know the rest. That's what Jesus wants the Jews of His day to do. It's also what He wants us to do.

When you were baptized you became an adopted child of God and a member of His household the Church. The first question that was asked and answered in your behalf was this: “Do you renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that you will not follow nor be led by them?”

In that holy Sacrament, you were freed from the bondage to sin into which all people are born. You were regenerate, born again, as a child of God and heir of eternal life. You were marked forever with the sign of the cross on your forehead.

Men may not see it, but the devil sees it and the angels see it and God sees it and recognizes that no matter what you may do with your life, you will always be a child of God.

You can distance yourself from the Church and from God and from your brothers and sisters in the faith, but you will still be a son or a daughter of God. You can take your journey to a far country and waste your heritage or ignore it. You can convert to another religion, or abandon religion altogether. You can sell yourself as a slave to your passions and desires or to the spirit of the age, but you cannot remove that invisible sign of the cross on your forehead. That means you can always come home, like the prodigal son, to a joyous reception.

There is another son in Luke’s parable who did not do any of the things his brother did. He stayed home. He was obedient to his father. He was never in bondage of any kind, except perhaps to jealousy or envy. If you can identify with that older son, you don’t have to listen to the rest of this sermon.

But if you can identify with the younger son in the parable, I have something to say to you: Come home.

Come home to the Father Who loves you. Come home to the Son Who gave His life to purchase your freedom from the bondage of sin. Come home to the Holy Spirit, the very breath of the God Who gave you life. Forget the empty husks that the world has to offer. Come to the place reserved for you at the table where you are fed with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Come home, child of God.

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