

8.2.2026 Trinity 9 (Luke 15:11-32)

In our sermon last Sunday we considered the thought that our greatest need in this life, and for the life to come, is to be brought back into right relationship with God, and that this, our most desperate need, is fulfilled in God's greatest gift - the gift of God the Son. Our focus last Sunday was Salvation, the immeasurable blessing which is ours only by the grace of God through faith in Christ Jesus, and Salvation was our focus because we'd just witnessed that priceless gift of grace given in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, a Sacrament Jesus described as new birth, as being "*born from above*" (John 3:3), a birth by which God delivers us out of the darkness of the womb and into the glorious light of His kingdom.

God has delivered us, He has brought us from darkness to light. We who were once His enemies are now His friends. Strangers have become sons and daughters of God, and with the truth of that immeasurable blessing in mind, I'd ask you to consider the thought that this new life we've been given is meant to be lived out, in our Father's house, as His faithful, beloved children. This thought comes to mind because the parable appointed as our Gospel reading this morning vividly illustrates, on one side, the abundant life that we live with our Father in His house, and on the other, the famine and misery we encounter when we choose to leave His home and separate ourselves from Him. In this parable there are two sons, but today we'll focus on the younger son, the one we call the prodigal, with the hope that his example will help us come to a greater understanding of the truth that it's only in our Father's house that we can honor and cherish the new life we've received, and like Jesus, grow "*in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man*" (Luke 2:52).

Now, before we consider this son, and the lessons we might learn through his example, it's important to understand the circumstances that led Jesus to tell this story, as well as two other parables that are part of the same dialogue. The parable of the Lost Sheep, the parable of the Lost Coin, and the story we read this morning, the one we call the parable of the Prodigal Son are all contained in the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke, and for our benefit, at the beginning of this dialogue Luke revealed the audience to whom Jesus was speaking, and the reason why He told them these stories. Luke set the scene

in this way, he wrote, “*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them*” (Luke 15:1-2).

St. Luke wants his reader to understand that Jesus told these parables to a particular audience. He was speaking directly to the tax collectors and sinners that were drawing near to hear Him, and to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about the fact that Jesus was receiving these sinners and eating with them. Luke sets the scene in this way to the end that we might recognize that as these stories are being told the tax collectors and sinners would see themselves as the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, and that when Jesus finished this three parable dialogue, the Pharisees and scribes would recognize themselves in the older son, who like them was struggling to understand why someone would so joyfully receive a despised, wayward sinner, and eat with them.

Jesus told these parables to a particular audience, but the words were written, and handed down over the centuries, not for their benefit, but for all who would come after them. So, with the thought in mind that Scripture was written for our instruction, and for our encouragement (Romans 15:4), let’s consider the part of the story we read from the Gospel this morning that describes the father’s younger son. As you know, this son approached his father, demanded his inheritance, and just a few short days after receiving that inheritance, he left his father’s house, journeyed to a foreign land, and wasted it all on riotous living. After he’d spent all he had, we learn that a severe famine swept through that country, and he began to be in need, “*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...*” (Luke 15:15-16).

It would be easy to read those words and draw the conclusion that the younger son had hired himself out to a citizen of that distant land because he needed to eat, but the word *joined* in that verse, he “*joined himself*” to a citizen of that country, is the same verb used in the Gospel to describe a man leaving his father and mother and being joined to his wife in marriage (Matthew 19:5). For the prodigal, it would seem this was more than a job. It was evidence that he’d left his father’s house, severed their relationship, and

“joined himself” to what you might call another family. In his hunger, like Esau, he’d sold his priceless, God-given birthright for a bowl of beans.

The tax collectors and sinners to whom Jesus was speaking would’ve seen themselves in this son, and we should as well. At one time or another we’ve all demanded our inheritance, left our father’s house, and joined ourselves to a family in a foreign land by thinking, speaking, and living in ways that only leave us hungry and homesick. St. Augustine vividly described that experience in this way. Likening himself to the prodigal son, he wrote, “I slid away from you and wandered away, my God; far from your steadfastness I strayed in adolescence, and I became to myself a land of famine.”

When we leave our Father’s house, we wander into a land of famine, a foreign land in which we cease to be who we truly are because we’ve gone and joined ourselves to something other than God. Think of king Solomon who joined himself in marriage to many foreign women, and in his old age, ceased to be himself, because his wives “*turned his heart after other gods*” (1 Kings 11:4) and he built high places to worship these idols, or consider Demas, who was described by St. Paul as one of his “*fellow workers*” in the Gospel ministry (Philemon 1:24), but later, when Paul was imprisoned, we learn that Demas abandoned both him and the ministry “*because he loved this world...*” (2 Timothy 4:10).

When we, like the prodigal, Solomon, or Demas, leave our Father’s house, when we join ourselves to anything other than God, we cease to be who we truly are because our identity is found in being joined Him - as sons and daughters. When we leave God, we leave our true self behind, but in the story of the prodigal there is hope, because his story turns on one phrase. After describing the famine and misery that has come from the prodigal’s sinful rebellion and selfish demands, Jesus tells us that the son finally “*came to himself*” (Luke 15:17). This phrase, which is rich with meaning, clearly reveals the truth that from the moment the prodigal demanded his inheritance and left his father’s house, he had ceased to be himself. One commentary I read described the son’s life and actions outside of his father’s house as a kind of derangement, that he was delusional, and so it is of every prodigal son or daughter. It is madness to separate ourselves from God. Even a creature understands that their identity, who they truly are, is found in their

Creator, and therefore how much more should we, not only as creatures, but as sons and daughters recognize the truth that it's only in our Father's house, "joined" to Him alone, that we can truly be ourselves.

The prodigal came to himself, but his return wasn't initiated by his own natural strength. His return began because of the grace found in a portion of his inheritance that he couldn't sinfully squander away in a foreign land. It was the grace present in the memory of his father's love and generosity, even toward the servants, that moved this son's heart to return to himself by returning to his father. In that foreign land the son thought, "*How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare...*" (Luke 15:17). Even in that distant country the love of his father called to him, and I suspect we've all experienced such grace. Who among us has not left our Father's house, wandered into a land of famine, and in our misery found the love and grace of God calling us home.

The prodigal came to himself, he arose and made a plan to return home that included a speech in which he intended say, "*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*" (Luke 15:18-19), and in his words we see that as far as he'd come, still he misunderstood his father's love. This prodigal son who had demanded his inheritance, moved as far away from his father as he could, wasted it all on riotous living, and severed their relationship thought that he could approach his father, repent, confess his sins, and perhaps be hired as a servant. His hope was to be given a position in which he'd be able to serve, and through service earn a place in his father's kingdom, but his father, our God, would have none of it, because child is not a servant. A child is a son or daughter, and so with the best robe, a ring, shoes, and a feast fit for a sinner, the father welcomed his son, and the immeasurable depth of the unearned, undeserved, and unconditional love of God was revealed.

The tax collectors and sinners drew near to hear Him. They saw themselves in the prodigal son. We should as well, and in doing so, be filled with the blessed assurance, that through new birth, God our Father welcomes us not only into His kingdom as citizens, but into His home where we gather at His table as daughters and sons.