



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Ninth Sunday After Trinity, August 1st, 2010

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
And of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

One of the most interesting things about sin is that it's so easy to recognize . . . at least in other people. Take, for instance, the Prodigal Son, the subject of today's Gospel reading: He is so obviously a sinner – and not even an intelligent one. In truth, he's plain stupid. Having stiffed his dad out of huge sum of money, he lets it trickle through his fingers. And he's so dumb he doesn't even realize what he's been doing – until he finds himself working as a swineherd and eating pig food.

But, then, stupidity is the main watchword in this parable. I realize it might seem a bit sacrilegious to say so, but even the father in the parable seems half daft. His son asks for half of his dad's worldly wealth – all the cash that's supposed to be coming to him in his will – and the old man simply hands over the dough, no questions asked. Frankly, if my kids had the cheek to ask me to do that, I'd send them away with a serious flea in the ear. And I'll bet that most of you would do the same.

On the other hand, how many of us outrageously spoil our children these days. They have toys by the roomful, computer

games coming out of their ears, and even their own TVs. Not only that, they hardly need to put their feet on the ground except to play. They are driven here, there and everywhere – softball practice, lacrosse practice, aerobics, karate, the mall. And that's just until they get their own cars, of course. It's not so very different from the way God has lavished blessings on us – just on a smaller scale, that's all.

It's no good for the older members of the community to pat themselves on the back and congratulate themselves on being so much more prudent in the matter of child rearing. The only reason you didn't lavish so many things on your kids is that toys today are a lot cheaper comparatively than they were in your day, and besides today's high tech toys weren't even a twinkle in their inventor's eye.

But if we are not so very different from the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, at least God has an excuse for his "no strings attached" generosity. If he were to force us to be virtuous and to use his good gifts wisely, he would rob us of a vital component of our humanity – our free will.

If he forced us to love him and obey him, we would not be free. Free will, you see, means that we are free to love him or to hate him. It means we are free to choose to pursue vice as well as virtue. The remarkable thing is that, for most of us, vice seems so much more attractive than virtue. It's not as though we get a lot out of it. When the buzz of instant gratification wears off, we usually end up feel guilty, sick or sick at heart, sometimes all three. But I digress . . .

The only sensible person in the parable seems to be the stay-at-home son. He seems to embody all the virtues God is looking for in us. He is respectful to his elders, loyal, hard working, obedient – everything a father could want in a son. And no doubt this is why so many Christians seem to identify themselves with the elder son.

Actually, it's not at all unreasonable for us to do so. After all, very few of us are as spectacularly sinful as the prodigal son. This is not necessarily because we are naturally more virtuous than the prodigal son. Riotous living takes an awful lot of energy and indolence should never be interpreted as virtue.

But Jesus actually tells us that the elder brother is an even more serious sinner than his younger sibling. Yes, he is loyal, respectful, hard working and obedient, but he has been well rewarded for it. He is going to inherit everything his father has to leave. Despite the fact that the prodigal has repented, he is not going to get a thing because he took his share up front and wasted it.

But his elder brother even resents the fact that his father is celebrating his brother's return from the dead. When he learns about

the party, he refuses even to enter the house. His father has to go out and beg him to join the celebration. But instead of coming in, he complains bitterly: "These many years have I served you and obeyed every word you said, but you have never given me so much as a kid so I could make merry with my friends . . ."

That is utterly unjust. It was in his own interest to stay home and work the farm. He is going to inherit it lock, stock and barrel. The idea he has never disobeyed his father strains credulity. But, even if it is true, his obedience is entirely self-serving – for the father's interests are his interests.

As to the notion he has never been given so much as a baby goat to make merry with his friends, this is clearly a down-right lie. It's unthinkable that his loving father would have denied him the means to have a good time with his friends.

Certainly, the elder brother's sins aren't sins of the flesh like those of his younger brother. His are sins of the spirit – anger, envy, greed, resentment and an utter lack of charity. And according to Jesus, sins of the spirit are even more serious than sins of the flesh.

Indeed, Paul says that unless we are charitable, all the other virtues we may possess are worthless. In other words, we might well be right to identify ourselves with the elder brother. But we shouldn't give ourselves a pat on the back when we do so. We're as much in need of forgiveness as our prodigal kid brother. *AMEN.*

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be
Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power,
Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***