



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Ninth Sunday After Trinity, August 21st, 2011

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

"... this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

The story of the Prodigal Son, begins with what must have been for its hearers a dramatic shock. The horror of it would have been almost unimaginable to them. "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me."

"In all of Middle Eastern literature... from ancient times to the present, there is no case of any son, older or younger, asking for his inheritance from a father who is still in good health" except in this parable. To ask for one's share of the estate did not break any law, but it was an unimaginably cruel and selfish thing to do. The younger son is saying, in effect, "I wish you were dead and had no more say in my life. I want to be free from you and your control. I don't care about you except as a provider for my wants and needs."

If Jesus' listeners were horrified and amazed by the cruel implications of the young man's selfish demand, they must have been flabbergasted by the father's acquiescence. Any first century Judean would have expected the father to explode in righteous anger and discipline. Instead they heard Jesus tell them of a father who expressed his love in an incredible way, who loved enough to grant his son the freedom to reject that love, the freedom to make wrong choices, the freedom to hurt himself in order that he might possibly find himself.

The lawyers were called in, the papers were signed, and the boy immediately set about cashing in his one third share of his father's property. It must not have been easy. No self respecting member of the community would want to have anything to do with his tearing apart of the family property. The boy had made himself an outcast. He was treated as though he were a leper, a social pariah.

Eventually someone was found who was greedy enough to take advantage of the situation and the son converted the family goods into transportable assets. He set off for the far country which had doubtlessly filled his fantasies for years. His heart had long ago left home and immigrated to that land of his dreams. Now he would catch up with his heart. He would not have to awake from his dream to face another day of toil in his father's fields, now he felt free to actually live his dream.

With money in his pocket and youthful dreams in his head, he became a one-man riot of self-indulgence, trampling, mutilating, and exhausting everything noble within him, or as the King James version puts it: "he wasted his substance with riotous living."

He had spent everything he had and now famine came upon the land. He had to find work in order to survive. Things were so bad that was forced to take on a job completely abhorrent for a Jew, taking care of a herd of pigs, and it paid so poorly he

would gladly have shared the pig's food had his boss allowed him to do so.

There's not much room for fantasy and high blown self-centered dreams when you're up to your knees in mud and hog dung. In order to survive, he was forced to face the reality of his situation. "And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" So he decided to swallow his pride and go home. His motives were not laudable. He had given no thought to his father's suffering or his own shame. He just wanted to survive but it turned him around and got him on the right path.

And that's what repentance is. .. turning toward home, the place where you can be free. Free to grow into the person that you have really always been but were too caught up in silly dreams and pride to recognize.

The prodigal resolved to admit his bad behavior and unworthiness to his father and to ask for a chance to make reparation as a hired servant and demonstrate his resolve to avoid further offense. However, before the son could propose this plan for his new life his father made it clear that the intention to enter into an honest relationship had returned him to what his position had really always been... his beloved son. "This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." *AMEN.*