



# ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Ninth Sunday After Trinity, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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

For most churchgoers, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is almost certainly the most comfortable of Jesus' parables. A substantial number of the people in the pews – a vast majority in most cases – are well past the age when one looks forward to the prospect of a wasting one's substance on riotous living. Indeed, one suspects that, for a goodly number of us, the idea of having a good time is taking a nap.

As for the younger members of the congregation, many of them are too young to understand what riotous living is all about. Most others are too busy wrestling with the demands of paying the mortgage, putting clothes on the kids and food on the table to have very much time, energy and cash left over for even a modest orgy.

The folks who qualify for the title role in the parable, you see, are far too busy being prodigal to come to church. Riotous living occupies too much of their time and attention. They don't have either the energy or the inclination to stumble out of bed on a Sunday morning to come to church – even for the 11.15 AM service.

This, however, is a thoroughly mistaken view of the parable. It ignores the fact that there are many more characters in the parable than that of

the prodigal son. There is, for example, the priggish, resentful and self-satisfied older brother. Then there is the grossly over indulgent father who lavishes huge sums of money on his self-indulgent younger son long before he is mature enough to handle it. Then there is the callous, even malicious, "gentile" who exploits the desperation of a person who has fallen on high times into betraying the fundamental tenets of his religious faith.

Indeed, the characters in this parable can be interpreted less than obvious ways – and deliberately so. The parable is intended to prompt reflection and meditation. In fact, we should be able to see something of ourselves in most of the characters as there are few of us who have not played every role in it – to a greater or lesser degree – a multiplicity of times. The Parable of the Prodigal Son amounts to a graphic description of the human condition.

Some folks might find this hard to swallow – especially those of us who have been taught that the father in the story actually represents God and his relationship with us, his creatures. This is, of course, a proper interpretation of the character of the father. The parable illustrates with great clarity God's relationship with us, but that is not the only lesson to be learned from it.

Jesus' parables are infinitely complex. They provide material for virtually endless study and contemplation. Thus in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the role of the father is by no means confined to that of God. Seen from another perspective, it was not solely the prodigal's presumption that caused his downfall. His father's gross over indulgence played a very big role in it. In real life, his dad should have said: "You've got to be joking!" But in real life doting fathers often don't.

The prodigal's father, however, doesn't solely represent the folks who lavish vast allowances on their offspring and present them with high-powered sports cars for graduating high school or passing the driving test. The father represents such folks as carelessly confer on people – related or not – authority over others that they are not equipped to exercise wisely, responsibly and judiciously. This happens in all areas of life – business, politics, even churches – often with baleful results.

God has, indeed, lavished on us gifts that we have proved ourselves incapable of handling responsibly. He has given us the gift of his creation together with the authority to rule over it – an authority that we all too often abuse. But when we find ourselves in trouble as a consequence, rarely do we so much as emulate the Prodigal Son and beg God's forgiveness. More often than not, we are inclined to blame God for the fact that we have fouled up. You know the sort of thing: "Oh God, why did you let that happen . . . ?"

But in reality, God isn't the one who inflicts nasty things on us. Usually the nasty things are Satan's work, or the work of our own hands or a consequence of the fallen nature of the world. When God created us among the gifts he showered on us was the gift of free will. We are taught in Holy Scripture that he did so because he loves us and he wants us to love him in return. This is because his very nature is love. In

other words, he is not just "loving," he actually is love, itself.

We might not be able to understand exactly how all this works, but we should be able to grasp there are implications arising from it. For instance, because he wants, above all things, for us to love him, he cannot constantly intervene every single time something nasty is about to happen. If he did so, he would deprive us of our free will. We would have no option but to obey him. And obedience is not the same thing as love. Far from it. It tends to inspire quite the opposite feelings.

What God has done is give us his Bible as a handy dandy users' manual for living – the divine equivalent of the owner's manual that comes with your snow blower or lawn mower. In the Bible, God has laid down the rules we need to follow if we are to live happy, fulfilled lives. He hasn't given us these rules capriciously, simply to make life difficult. He has done so because he created us and therefore he knows what is best for us. And just in case we don't get the message, he has given us the history of his chosen people to illustrate the way things work out when we take his advice as well as the likely consequences of our failure to do so.

He knows, of course, that we are incapable of living according to his laws, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son spells out how he saves us from the consequences of this unhappy fact. God can't intervene to save us from the nasty things we bring down upon ourselves, but, for those who put their trust in him, he has made the ultimate bad thing, death, the gateway to everlasting life. He doesn't mete out harsh penalties or demand extravagant sacrifices. All we need to do is put our trust in our Savior Jesus Christ and ask his forgiveness. It should be a no brainer: After all a life of eternal happiness sure beats the alternative. *AMEN.*