



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Ninth Sunday After Trinity, August 2nd, 2015

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

When I was a youngster, I used try to identify with at least one of the characters in each of Jesus' parables. And not being unduly humble, I tended to cast myself in the hero's role rather than the part of the guy who fouls up and makes a fool of himself.

It was reasonably easy, for example, to see myself as the Good Shepherd. After all I had personal experience in the art of minding sheep – and I knew they are an awful lot more stupid than I am.

Similarly, because I considered myself basically kind, I always pictured myself as the Good Samaritan rather than the Priest or the Levite. Identifying with the chap in the gutter never entered my mind. To me, he seemed to be simply an anonymous character Jesus introduced to the story in order to make his point. However, the Parable of the Prodigal Son – today's Gospel reading – presented a serious problem.

There isn't a single character in the story I thought sufficiently empathetic to warrant casting myself in his role. They all seem to be absolute loons.. The Prodigal, himself, is unspeakably presumptuous. How could anybody be so arrogant as to demand from his father half the proceeds of the family business without having lifted a finger to earn the money?

Nor is his stay-at-home brother any gift to mankind. A miserable, envious tight wad, who is going to inherit his father's entire estate – the

whole kit and caboodle – and yet he apparently resents his father celebrating the fact that the son who had so disappointed him has come to his senses and returned home.

But worse even, the father hasn't got any more sense than the others. What sort idiot would hand over half the family business to some jumped up young dolt – fresh out of college, with no real world experience whatsoever – simply because he asked for it?

Not my father, that was for sure! He'd at first seemed sympathetic when I'd asked him to let me have a small advance from some money I'd been left by an elderly relative to buy a neat little MG sports car. But then he'd said thoughtfully: "I know a way you could buy that car without dipping into your capital."

I was intrigued. "Really," I said, "What's that, Dad?"

"It's called work," he replied, tartly. No riotous living for me!

It took a lot of growing up before I came to understand Jesus expects us to identify with all of the characters in all of his parables. At one time or another, for example, all of us in real life play the part of the Good Samaritan, the Priest, the Levi and guy in the gutter.

We are not only the sowers who sow the seeds, but also the birds that peck it up, the rocky

ground upon which it withers and perishes, the weeds that rise up and choke it.

Rather less often, I'm sorry to say, we are the good ground upon which it flourishes and bears forth fruit in abundance. In the same vein, we are the feckless prodigal, the resentful stay-at-home and the foolishly indulgent father.

While the parables tell us a lot of unpalatable truths about ourselves, they also give us a clearer insight into how God thinks and why he acts the way he does. And the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son provides an excellent example of this.

Unlike most human fathers, who try not to spoil their offspring, the Prodigal's is infinitely generous and openhanded. He hands over half his fortune to his feckless son seemingly without a second thought.

And, again, unlike most human fathers who tend to be a bit judgmental with their children – clothes, haircuts, boy friends and girl friends, etc. – the Prodigal's father seems infinitely tolerant and forgiving.

His son's return to the fold is entirely motivated by self interest, yet his father "sees him a far off" and drops everything to rush out to meet him. He isn't dismayed by his son's formulaic little apology. Instead he gives him a ring (a symbol that he's a free citizen), shoes, a coat and orders up a big party for him.

The conclusion to be drawn here is that God is like a human father only up to a certain point. This shouldn't entirely surprise us. Scripture tells us that his thoughts aren't our thoughts and his ways aren't our ways.

One of the ways he differs from us, according to the Bible, is that he is a spirit and, thus, neither male nor female. But if, we want to get an idea of what he is like, he tells us to picture him as a father rather than a mother. But perhaps the most important way in which he differs from us lies in his fundamental nature: He tells us he is love – not that he loves, but that he actually IS love.

And because he IS perfect love, he loves us no matter who we are or what we do.

All he wants in return for his unbounded love is for us to love him, too. And the way he wants us to do so again demonstrates his infinitely loving nature. He tells us to show our love for him by loving our fellow men as much as we love ourselves.

That's the rub. True love cannot be compelled. Thus God gives us freedom to make up our own minds whether to love him or reject him. It is easy to declare one loves somebody one doesn't see at the breakfast table every morning or over the backyard fence. But it's another thing to feel that way about people whose dogs do their business in one's yard or who carve one up on I 695.

It is above all our failure to treat those people in a loving fashion that separates us from him. The parable makes this plain. The prodigal shows no concern for his father or his brother when he makes his outrageous demand. He doesn't care about their feeling. He isn't concerned that he might be leaving them short of cash.

Similarly, his fair weather friends didn't care for him when they'd run through his money. And the gentile didn't show any love when he sent him into his fields to tend pigs – the most unclean animal of all.

It was "all about them." And when "everything's all about you" there's no room left over for loving your neighbor. And this is the basic thing that separates us from God. He is perfect in his love, but, strive as we might, we are utterly imperfect. And perfection by its very nature cannot exist with imperfection.

But God, in his infinite love, has made provision for that. He has given us his only begotten Son Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for our failures. The parable tells us that if we just make the move towards him, and he will come running to us, proclaiming: "This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found." *AMEN.*