



# St. Stephen's Anglican Church

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

The Ninth Sunday After Trinity, Sunday, August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019

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

When we were growing up, my friends and I used Bible stories and parables as a yardstick by which to measure our standing in the eyes of God. We were generally a pretty kindly lot so we figured we measured up to the standards set by the Good Samaritan. We weren't hypocrites like the Pharisees, but, while we knew we were naughty from time to time, we took comfort from the fact that God loved Jacob and King David even though they were often rather naughty, too.

There were, however, a number of parables in which we could never see ourselves. One of them was the Parable of the Prodigal Son. There was nobody in the story who bore any resemblance to us. We weren't as ungrateful and badly behaved as the prodigal, himself. Nor were we as unkind and uncharitable as his elder brother.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son was a story we could we could listen to basking contentedly in the rosy glow of our own relative virtue. Thus, it came as something of a shock to learn Jesus expects us to identify ourselves not only with the badly-behaved Prodigal Son, but also with his grudge-bearing and uncharitable brother.

Our inability to see ourselves in the Parable of the Prodigal Son was by no means solely a consequence of our enthusiasm for measuring ourselves against others and finding them wanting. An important contributory factor was our absorption with technicalities of sins.

We didn't so much ponder the nature of sin, itself. Rather, we devoted ourselves to figuring out the technical details of what constitutes a sin and which sin is the most serious. Continuing down that road distracted us from the really important business of dealing with our own sins.

Sad to say, some Christians never progress beyond this. Even on the rare occasions when they move

away from the abstract analysis of what is sinful and what is not to the particular, they don't wrestle with their own sins, but, rather, the sins that are committed by other people.

Among many other things, the Parable of the Prodigal Son graphically illustrates our aptitude for overlooking our own sins. The Prodigal, for example, is entirely blind to his amazing effrontery in demanding half of everything his father owns. It didn't occur to him that he had no moral right to a single red cent.

In fact he was doing what we all do when we commit sins. He rationalized his way out of the situation. He persuaded himself his demand was completely reasonable. "Half of everything is going to come to me when the old man kicks the bucket," he said to himself, "therefore I've got a right to half of it already."

If it sounds like nutty logic to you, it's because it is somebody else's sin we are considering. When our own sin's involved, we tend to be every bit as blind as the Prodigal Son. Sadly, the Prodigal Son

never seems to wake up to the stupid way in which he seduced himself into sin. It only occurs to him he might need to repent when he's spent every last cent and he's out there in the muck, eating pig's swill.

What's more, his feelings of repentance arise more from practical considerations than feelings of guilt. There he is in the pig pen, fighting for his share of hog chow, when it suddenly dawns to him that, back home on his father's spread, even folks on minimum wage are a lot better off than he is.

It's a rather more unflattering description of the repentance process than the one so eloquently expressed in the General Confession: "We do earnestly repent. And a heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable."

If only it was the pricking of our consciences that forced us to repent. The truth of the matter is the most common cause of repentance is that, like the Prodigal Son, the intolerable burdens of our sins

arise not because of the grief and pain they have caused God but because of the grief and pain our bad behavior has caused we ourselves.

Another of the lessons appointed for today concerns a woman caught in the act of adultery. The punishment for the offense was death by stoning, However, to win a conviction, Mosaic Law required at least two witnesses to the actual physical act. Thus it's unlikely the lady was simply a careless housewife, but rather a notorious repeat offender – in other words a professional lady of easy virtue.

When Jesus was asked to adjudicate, he simply picked up a stone and offered it to the men who were standing around him, and said: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her."

Jesus was not condoning adultery. He told the woman to go away and sin no more. What he did was remind the woman's accusers that they, too, were sinners. Their sins might not have been as spectacular or scandalous as the woman's, even so

they were in equal need of God's forgiveness.

Jesus' larger point is there is no merit whatsoever to be gained from resisting sins to which we are not tempted. Every one of us is a sinner, but our sins vary from person to person. No besetting sin is inherently more sinful than another besetting sin. The fact you not tempted to covet what is not yours, like the Prodigal Son, or to commit adultery, like the unfortunate woman, is of no consequence. There is something else lurking around that is no less nasty. It's all part of being human.

The story of the Prodigal Son shows us up for the selfish, ungrateful, hypocrites we really are. But, more important, it also sheds a remarkable light on God's warning to (Isaiah 55:8): "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord."

For starters, the parable reveals how both amazingly loving God is—and how modest. Our great Creator's paramount concern seems to be saving disobedient, disrespectful and utterly inconsequential little creatures like ourselves from

the consequences of disobeying his rules – rules made not for his comfort, but for our own good.

It isn't that God is unaware of the infinite difference in importance between himself and us. He understands perfectly, but ignores it. It is as though he couldn't give a hoot about his own exalted status vis a vis our infinitely lesser importance. All he seems to care about is our well-being.

The Prodigal Son teaches us that God doesn't actually wait for us physically – or even mentally – return to him. Mere intention seems to be enough. "While he was yet a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion on him, and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son."

The way Jesus tells it, the father almost cuts the son off when he says, "Father I am no more worthy . . ." It's almost as though he's not very interested in the sins he has committed. The father

already seems to be looking in another direction -- calling servants to bring him a new robe, a ring for his finger, shoes for his feet. It's almost as though he doesn't hear the son's shabby little confession. It is as though the father's only interest in the matter is forgiving him . . . .

What's more, the prodigal's apology isn't so much an expression of sorrow as a statement of fact. It is also an act of extraordinary presumption -- presumption as outrageous as his demand for half of everything his father owns. It never crosses his mind God might tell him to get lost.

He seems to assume, quite unquestioningly, God is predisposed to forgive all sinners. And the truly comforting thing about it is the parable confirms he's absolutely right to think that way. AMEN

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