

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*

If you were to turn to the front of your Prayer Book and take a look at today’s Morning Prayer readings, you would notice that they share a common theme with the Epistle and Gospel. Today, the theme of the lessons is this: *Turn from the idols of your heart. Come to yourself and realize that it is time to return to your Heavenly Father. He is merciful and eagerly waiting for you to come home.*

As the Parable found in today’s Gospel makes clear, our Heavenly Father is full of mercy and compassion. And, as it was declared by the Psalmist in one of those Morning Prayer lessons, “The LORD is full of compassion and mercy, long-suffering, and of great goodness.” Truly, God is ever ready to forgive the sinner who repents and turns from the idols of his heart.

Are you ready to repent? What are the idols in your life? This morning you, like the Prodigal Son, are challenged to leave them in the far country and return to the loving arms of your Heavenly Father.

Many people do not believe that God is merciful. Even those who say they believe He is, often times, do not believe so in their hearts. They may give mentally assent to the idea of God being merciful, but the way they both (1) talk to God and (2) about God say otherwise. This is true, even of Christians. In addition to this, many people do not believe in their hearts that God is their Father. They do not believe that they are one of His children. They do not believe that God will be merciful to them, should they repent of their sins and come home.

Do you know that every time you fall away, God is waiting for you to come home? Or do you instead think that God has turned His back on you? That He has lost hope in you...that you are too far gone, and that He considers you no longer worthy to be called His child?

Today, the Gospel could not be more clear. Through what we have come to know as the Parable of the Prodigal Son, our Lord reveals to us that our Heavenly Father is ever keeping watch on the horizon...God is patiently waiting for his wayward children to leave the far country of sin and come back home.

Jesus wants us to know that His Father is full of mercy and compassion and ever ready to forgive us sinners. Jesus wants us to know that if we repent of our sins and leave our idols in the far country, our Heavenly Father will welcome us home as His beloved children.

This morning, the parable challenges us to question for ourselves, *Do we believe in the mercy of God? Do we believe that if we repent of our sins that our Heavenly Father will celebrate our return home? Do we believe that God will show mercy to us?*

Today, as we consider the parable, our focus is placed upon the Prodigal Son, a character in a story who represents all who have sinned against our Heavenly Father. Many of us are familiar with the parable, so let us only review it in summary.

A son goes to his father, demands his share of the inheritance. He squanders it in a far country through riotous living. While he is away, his older brother remains at home. It is there that the older brother bitterly continues to serve his father. Once the younger son has spent all of his inheritance, a famine

enters the land, and he finds himself desperately tending to the pigs that belong to a citizen of that far country.

It is here that the story takes a turn. As the younger son is starving, having less to eat than even the swine he serves, the son comes to his senses. Our Lord describes this turning point, saying, "And when [the younger son] came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with Hunger!"

In this moment, the younger son looks deep into his own heart and realizes that there is no life in the riotous living he has been engaging in. As the Parable states, "[The Prodigal Son] came to himself," that is to say, he at last looked inward and came to understand his great need for repentance.

Being convicted of his sin, the younger son decides to return home, saying, "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants."

It is true that the younger son has come to himself...that he has realized his great need to be forgiven, but has he begun his journey home seeking forgiveness? What does he hope to find when his long journey home comes to an end?

Consider closely the words that the younger son has prepared to speak to his father, for they reveal a great deal about what was going on within his heart. With each step towards home, the son imagines what might take place between himself and his father. He comes up with the following speech, "Father, I...am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants."

Based upon these words, do you think the son truly believed that he would find forgiveness when he got home? Did he instead believe that the only hope he had left was to become a hired servant...an estranged son...a stranger in his own home?

You see...throughout the entire parable, the Prodigal Son has been distracted by sin...the eyes of his soul have been distorted, and as a result, he struggles to believe in the goodness of his father. Based upon the words that the son has prepared, we can question whether or not the son believes that his father is merciful and compassionate.

Often times, we project our own sins unto those around us! We, like the Prodigal Son in today's story, even make judgements about our Heavenly Father on the basis of our own sinfulness!

If we consider the father of the two sons from today's parable, we will notice that he has been nothing but charitable, merciful, and compassionate with not only the younger son, but the older as well. How could the younger son think that his father would accept him back only as a hired servant? How could he think that he was no longer worthy to be his father's son? Yes, he had been a terrible son...but a son nonetheless. And when he told his father that he wanted his share of the inheritance, did not the father respond in mercy, actually dividing his estate between the two sons and allowing the younger son to exercise his own will? Does not the same father invite the older son to himself show mercy and compassion to his younger brother upon his return. Here too, the father allows the child to choose whether or not he will walk in love.

SERMON – THE EIGHTH SUNDY AFTER TRINITY – 11 AUGUST 2019

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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Clearly, the father in today's story allows his sons to choose whether or not they will love him in return, but, because of they choose evil over virtue, are we to think that the father is evil because of the iniquity of the sons? Are we to think that the merciful and compassionate father somehow became vengeful, harsh, and unforgiving because of the sins of the children?

Of course not! This parable was given unto us by our Lord so that we could marvel at the depth of the father's love: a love that allows the son to choose whether or not he will love him in return...a love that does not disregard the will of the other, but rather, invites the other to return the gift that is first given.

How many times have we like the Prodigal Son, in fear of what our Heavenly Father might do to us if we returned home, spiritually starved ourselves among the swine of our sins? How many times have we, like the older son, failed to give thanks for the mercy the father has shown to those who have wronged us? How often have we allowed sin to drag us to absolute rock bottom before the thought of repentance has even crossed our minds? How many times have we failed to confess our sins because we fear what might happen to us if we voice them aloud to God or to one of his priests?

This morning, we must ask ourselves, do we believe that God is merciful? Do we believe that He forgives sinners? Do we trust that he will receive us back, not as a hired servant, but as one of his beloved children? If we do, then we must live like we do. If we do, then we must talk to God and talk about God as if He is merciful and compassionate.

Today, we are called to either begin or to continue our long journey home. We are called to come to ourselves and realize that we have sinned against our father and are in need of his forgiveness. This morning, may we trust that if we go to God in a spirit of contrition and repentance, we will be welcomed home. If we do so, we will hear the voice of the Father, saying, bring the finest robe, place a ring upon my child's finger, it is time to make merry; for, my child was lost but now is found...he was dead, but now alive.