

Three Lives
9th Sunday after Trinity
(From the Gospel: St. Luke xv. 11 ff.)

11 And [Jesus] said , A certain man had two sons: **12** And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. **13** And not many days after the younger son gathered all together , and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living . **14** And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want . **15** And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. **16** And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat : and no man gave unto him. **17** 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! **18** I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, **19** And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. **20** And he arose , and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off , his father saw him, and had compassion , and ran , and fell on his neck, and kissed him. **21** 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. **22** But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: **23** And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat , and be merry : **24** For this my son was dead, and is alive again ; he was lost , and is found . And they began to be merry . **25** Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. **26** And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant . **27** And he said unto him , Thy brother is come ; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound . **28** And he was angry , and would not go in : therefore came his father out , and intreated him. **29** And he answering said to his father, Lo , these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: **30** But as soon as this thy son was come , which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. **31** And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. **32** It was meet that we should make merry , and be glad : for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again ; and was lost , and is found .

There are, of course, three principal characters in this famous parable: the *father*, and the *two sons*, the *younger* and the *elder*.

This story has always held a special place for me: I was the youngest of three brothers, and probably did the best job among all three of us of destroying my prospects. Although my older brothers had their real seasons of struggle, perhaps they ranged far less than I away from the beaten paths that tend to keep lives orderly and somewhat predictable. The *far country* I *journeyed* to, along with many fellow travelers, was the outlandish culture of the Sixties, which included not only *riotous living* but complete departures from reality..., a *far country*, indeed, from which some actually failed to return at all.

But this parable is also cherished by all of us because it is a story of redemption. The *father* represents God, who confers free will upon His sons, to do as they desire with the things He has bestowed upon them. He refuses to keep them back by restraint. Although he well knows the end of their willfulness, He has no choice but to give them free reign. It is, after all, the way that He has designed the world, and mankind in particular, made in His image. God has, as it were,

placed restrictions upon His own options, when it comes to mankind. The unconditional forgiveness the father in today's parable offers the son upon his return, which even assumes the quality of celebration, is, of course, a type of the redemption that the God the Father offers through His own Son. It is without rhyme nor reason, as the envious reaction of the *elder son* certainly demonstrates, for he simply cannot see how his younger brother's behavior merits the Father's response.

But today I want to focus on other aspects of the story: the *experience* of the three protagonists. If we attempt to look inside their hearts, we will discover that there is far, far more to this parable than its mere details might seem to provide.

Think first of the *father*. Only parents know the grief and anguish associated with raising children when they are clearly set to make the wrong choices! When the son presents himself to his father and says *give me the portion of goods that falleth to me*, he has effectively broken his father's heart. The inheritance, after all, should have been distributed by his father at a chosen time, one carefully picked by the parent to assure that all that he had stored up for his sons would benefit them, allowing him to grow old and pass on with a sense that his own life would be safely perpetuated through those of his sons.

There is a blithe carelessness about the son's request. The father knows that the son has not the slightest idea of what he is about to do both to himself and to his family. He is deeply aware of the young man's immaturity, inexperience, and vulnerability. But it is because the father is a loving, responsible parent who recognizes the very real limitations of parental control, that he grants this unwise request. Love must sometimes allow consequences. What good after all -- the old man may have mused-- would it do to restrain him? As his son struts off with the money, the father could only imagine the disaster that awaits him.

This dad loved his sons dearly. If he had resorted to other means, he would have attempted to rigorously control their lives, as so many parents do. Let's be realistic here about the father's sacrifice. What will the son's profligacy do to the family name? The bright, resourceful future that the father must have imagined for his family was now a wrecked vision. Hopes and dreams gave way to fears and uncertainties. It is simply amazing what consequences attend stubborn willfulness. But if we have loved ones who have exercised their God-given right to make choices when they have come of age, we can only stand by, watch, wait, and pray, as this man surely did.

But now let's turn to the experience of the younger son. In gaining so easily what he had eagerly sought, he instead did himself great harm, without realizing it. By his actions he greatly devalued a number of things in his life that he should have held precious: not only his inheritance, of course, but his relationship to his father, and all of the honor and propriety that it con-

tained. In abusing and mistreating his parent in this fashion --because that's what his selfishness amounted to-- he hardened his heart to those things that matter most in life, far more than one's *goods* and *substance*. In other words, he harmed himself just as badly as his dad. It will take some major life lessons to undo the damage and grant him some much needed instruction.

Note that it isn't contemplating his father's love and missing it that causes him to *come to himself*. It is his misery, his hunger, and his desperate straits. Rather, he imagines even his father's servants faring better than where he has gotten himself, so he seems to contrive a confession that he thinks might work: *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*. He is starving. He has no one to turn to: *no man gave unto him*. The faces that surrounded him are hard, mean, and unloving: "You got what you deserved, kid! Don't come crawlin' to me. Besides you're not any of my kin. I don't owe you nothin'!" He runs home having no idea what to expect. He is still essentially focused on himself.

Let's reconsider the father. Who is he focused upon: *his son: But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him*. Since the young man departed, the father has constantly been looking for him. Many of us have been there: watching the driveway, listening for a certain voice, waiting for a phone call, a letter, any sign of change. Absent from this dear man's heart is pride that would restrain him from embracing a wayward son, or anger, rage, and blame for the trouble that he has endured because of him.

Back to the younger son. I think we can imagine that he is being moved very rapidly through a number of amazing lessons, and all of it because of the love of his father. Not only is he neither punished for his time away, nor stripped of his place at the family table, but he is rejoiced over as if he is the very most valuable thing his father possesses! We can be assured that these experiences will impress in his heart something that will endure for a lifetime. Although he has lost his inheritance --it certainly cannot be returned to him-- he has learned the humility and gratitude that come from being saved from a situation of one's own making, to which one might have deservedly been condemned, by an unconditional love which wants nothing else of him other than...*himself*.

But we must now turn to the *elder brother*. He is the only figure in the story that sadly remains completely untransformed. The father's loving heart had been made that much more loving by the deep grief and suffering he has endured. And the younger son has learned among many lessons that there is far more to life than the achievement of one's immediate goals at the expense of others. But the older son is stuck. Or perhaps he moves even from bad, to worse. He had never perceived his father's love in the first place through all the privileges he had enjoyed:

Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. There can hardly be a worse sin than ingratitude. It never is thankful for small things, or large things, or anything. It always feels it deserves what it has received. Whereas we might assume that his younger brother has been largely cured of his selfishness, the older sibling is unable to enter into his father's delight over the reappearance of his brother.

Now we might ask, why should he? After all, this is his brother, not his son. But his very stability, and loyal obedience to his father, and great success, in contrast with his younger brother, should have placed him in a position of generosity of heart both toward his parent and his brother. After all, what did he have to lose? He still had his inheritance, his reputation, his record of fidelity, loyalty, and hard work. All of this should have endowed him with enough greatness of soul to set aside his doubts and criticisms and join in with the celebration. He would have lost nothing, and gained everything, especially by answering an invitation specifically presented to him by his father.

But instead, he awards his father more injury, on the very occasion when the father's joy and happiness could have been unqualified. He ruins the moment. Instead of vanquishing his worst enemy, and the worst enemy of all of us: *self--*, he greatly expands its power in his life.

Surely there is much we've drawn from this parable already. But perhaps a principal lesson for us is to strive, at all costs, to process life as nobly, as wonderfully, as lovingly and faithfully as did this loyal father. To do so will mean that all of the blows that life brings to bear upon us will only serve to make a good thing better. The younger son ended up much to the good, as well, but it was only because of the attitude of his dad. His hard knocks drove him home, where he was received with an incomprehensible welcome. But the older brother is the real tragedy which we must avoid at all costs: joyless, self-righteous superiority which is ever resentful for the reward it fancies it deserves and hasn't received, anger against both God and man which prohibits others, if possible, from the grateful enjoyment of life.

How thankful we can be that our God is determined to complete the reconstruction project, the absolute overhaul, that He has begun in each and all of our lives!

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