



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, March 14, 2010**  
*The Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare)*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector  
on  
Saint Luke 15:11-32

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### *CONCERNING THE PRODIGAL SON*

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

There are two things to note in order to understand the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The first is the context, Luke 15:1ff. Saint Luke says, “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’” The climax of Jesus’ response to this criticism is today’s Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The second thing to note is that tradition has shortchanged Christ’s parable by calling it The Prodigal Son. True enough, the prodigal son, the spendthrift younger brother who goes very far astray before his return, is the attention-getter. But there are three important characters in the story, which is truly a Parable of the Loving Father with Two Lost Sons. One, the prodigal son, returns and, like the tax collectors and sinners drawing near to Jesus, draws near to his father. The other, the elder brother, stays home and yet is as lost and far off as was his reckless brother, but in a different way. As with the Pharisees and scribes murmuring against Jesus, whether the elder brother will stop complaining and draw near to his father is in question.

Let us look at how each of the two sons is lost. The younger brother, the spendthrift, insults his father by demanding his share of the inheritance before the time. He leaves home and squanders what he has in extravagant, riotous living. He is reduced to feeding pigs and is so hungry he would have eaten what the swine were fed. The pinch of necessity brings him to his senses, and he returns home to ask his father to take him on as a hired servant. But his father saw him at a distance, ran to embrace and kiss him, and, perhaps even before the son could finish his apology, had him richly clothed and called for a feast, “for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”

The older brother, out working in the field, hears the festivities and is angry to learn what they are about. He refuses to come in. But the father comes out and entreats him to go in. Just as the younger son insulted his father, so does the older. He calls his father “You.” He calls his brother “this son of yours who has devoured your living with harlots.”

And he has been keeping score: “Look, these many years I have served you and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid (let alone the fatted calf) that I might have a party with my friends!” The story ends with the father re-affirming love and relationships: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad; for this your brother was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

The Father’s love was always there; not only there, but outgoing, to each of his sons. The brothers, though outwardly very different, were both inwardly cut off from their father. The younger brother took a long, heedless journey into self-will, doing simply as he pleased. The older brother, though well off at home, imprisoned himself in self-righteousness by conforming to duty and serving his time. World-weariness drove the younger son back home to his father, where he rediscovered the father’s love. Interior burn-out had long since killed the older son’s sense of love, and it is not clear what will prompt him back to life and to the rediscovery of his father.

The danger of the older son’s position is shown in his long run of apparent goodness. He has lived a loveless servant’s regimen, which can be a disguise even to its wearer. The prodigal son, the tax collector, the harlot, these all have no disguise; their sins are obvious. But the sins of the older son, the Pharisee, the religious and moral person, these are for the most part unseen cancers. Pride, envy and anger are often unrecognized, especially by the respectable person himself; only flaring out occasionally as in the older son’s contempt for his newly returned younger brother and resentment against his delighted father.

Good Christians and church people, even former prodigal, wayward sons and daughters, can develop older-brother tendencies, and these are to be guarded against. If we find ourselves in a mood of self-congratulation with regard to our faith, our values, our track record, especially over-against others, then we are moving away from the Father’s love – whether we go off into a far country or stay at home.

Most important is the Father and the nature of his love for each of his sons, for all of his children, whether they are wayward or good. This is a parable about God, whose love is incarnate in Christ. The Father’s love does not keep score. It does not cherish grievances but instead it rejoices and gives thanks for life here and now. The Father’s love is even self-forgetful, because it has its eyes on the grace of the present moment and of the beloved. His love does not concern itself with what is his, but is generous with everything at his disposal. He does not even worry about being right and judging wrong, but forgives even before repentance and reconciliation come. The Father went out in love to each of his sons.

Years ago, one of the most upright, decent, good men I have ever known, after hearing today’s Gospel read in church, confided to me that he did not like the Parable of the Loving Father with the Two Lost Sons. It wasn’t fair, he said, with feeling. What he could not hear, I realized, was the Father’s entreaty to his older son: “Son, you are always with me; everything that is mine is yours.” The father’s welcome of that younger son, without as much as a good term of penance, bothered him. And so it is. Jesus gave us this parable both to comfort and to bother. For Jesus knows that each one of us, younger or older son, appearances aside, is in need of rescue. He came, as the hymn says, to bring “love to the loveless, that they might lovely be.”

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