

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 15, 2019

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Saint Luke's 15th Chapter consists of three parables: the Lord's story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (known as *the prodigal son*). For showing us the teaching style of God Incarnate these are as good as it gets. If there is any drawback it is that these parables are too beautiful! The sinner in us cannot believe and trust the Good News. Our tendency is to believe we deserve something *less*. But Jesus is the Divine Expert. His parables make clear the highest personal relationship we know on earth (that of a perfect father and a perfect son) is the closest we can know to what God has designed for His relationship to each one of us.

The first two parables set up the third. They remind us of God's tireless search for the sinner, and the *value* the sinner has for God. It is not that God is merely anxious for a soul. The soul has *value* for Almighty God. Each soul is one of His jewels. An oriental peasant woman uses her coins not just for trade but also for adornment. She *wears* them. You are one of your Heavenly Father's jewels, and part of His grand design.

These first two parables establish that each soul is kept track of, and if lost, a search is made for it. Why? *Because it has value*. This is true even though a lost sheep and a lost coin cannot respond to or turn back to God. Neither has initiative. But then comes the third parable! The lost son has opportunity to respond to God. And so do we. We can come to Him or go away from Him, as did the prodigal son. So Our Blessed Lord reminds us when repentance begins, and even *before* it begins, there is first of all a movement of the love of God. In anything we do towards Him. *Almighty God has made the first move*.

In an early 20th century English painting we see in the foreground an old man standing on a balcony at dawn. We know it is early spring because there are no leaves yet on the trees. The old man is intently watching the farthest point on a road in the distance. We know he has been doing it for a long time because at his feet is a lighted lantern, now no longer needed in the early light. In the parable Jesus tells, the father saw his son while he was a great way off. Long before dawn breaks the Father has been watching the road.

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You and I inherit fallen human nature. It carries with it a long tradition of wrong choices. When we struggle with a problem we think it has happened to no one else. This can lead to isolation, despair, and depression. And even when we turn to God the thought of doing so shames us and makes us feel like hypocrites. That describes the prodigal son. He said “I will arise and go to my father and ask for the ordinary room and board he gives to hired hands.” You know the story! That is not where the prodigal son ended up, but it is where he started!

Now listen to this. Jesus does not want us to wait until a higher and better motive comes along. Make whatever move you can *right now*, in the right direction. If you cannot act on a higher motive than a guilty discomfort, then act on that! Soldiers have a name for this condition. They call it *foxhole religion*. Just so long as you do not leave religion after leaving the foxhole! But a foxhole is as good a place as any to begin the journey to the Lord. *Any place* is a good place to begin that journey.

In the heavenly realm there is supreme joy on the thrice-holy face of Almighty God over one sinner that repents. Only the angels and saints see that joy. But you and I could cause that look. Why? *Because we have such a Lord and God.*