

Breaking Open the Word

Lent 4C

30th March, 2025



Squanderer!

A weekly reflection and
sermon, with study and
prayer guides following the
RCL Lectionary

Dennis Webster



Revised Common Lectionary

Lent 4C

Joshua 5.9-12

Psalm 32

2 Corinthians 5.16-21

Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32

Book of Common Prayer (1662) Collect

Introduction

Reflection

Discussion Questions

Five Days of Meditation and Prayer

Grant, we beseech thee,
Almighty God,
that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily
deserve to be punished,
by the comfort of thy grace
may mercifully be relieved:
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In his sermon, Dennis explores the profound meaning of the parable of the Prodigal Son, challenging the audience to reconsider the implications of being "prodigal." He highlights the reckless wastefulness of the youngest son, who squanders his inheritance, and the father, whose extravagant forgiveness encourages a spirit of excess.

The elder son's resentment towards his brother and his father's actions provides a lens through which to examine our responses to grace, especially during emotional conflict.

Dennis emphasises that forgiveness and acceptance are central themes in the narrative, urging the congregation to reflect on how they view those who falter and return.

Transitioning from the specific story of the Prodigal Son, Dennis connects it to broader themes

found in the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus counters the judgment of the Pharisees by illustrating God's relentless pursuit of the lost. He touches upon the importance of community, identity, and the call to repentance, likening it to the Israelites entering the Promised Land.

Ultimately, Dennis encourages listeners to embrace a heart of compassion and grace—as demonstrated by the father in the parable—and to recognise that God's love is expansive, welcoming everyone back.

He concludes with a prayer for discernment and courage to respond to the call of the Gospel, reinforcing the message of hope and salvation that transcends personal grievances and societal judgments.

Prayer Prompts

- Ask for prayer requests from the group.
- Pray for the strength to embrace forgiveness in our lives.
- Ask God to help us view our relationships through the lens of grace and love.
- Seek guidance in living out the teachings from the sermon throughout the week.

God of Creation, breathe into us, made of clay,
your gift of life so that we, made in your image
may become your eyes, ears, hands and voice.

You squandering, wanton, reckless, careless waster! How dare you come to show your face back here? And you, you stupid man, why are you throwing a party to welcome him back? Do you do this after all I've done for you?

To maintain my PG rating, the rest of that rant will go unread, unsaid, but no doubt truly understood. A question that stopped me short on Tuesday was to define precisely what Prodigal means. As is often the case in the Church, we use terms that are assumed to be understood, but the reality is that we use them without realising that we're not all on the same page.

A prodigal is precisely what that line of abuse describes. In this cherished and beloved yet often misdirected story, the term prodigal applies to both the youngest son and, from the elder son's perspective, their father. What was clear for everyone to see was the wanton, reckless, careless, and extravagant wasting of the youngster's inheritance; and then, to top it all off, the father gives him a new robe, a gold ring, and a lavish

feast featuring the best-fatted calf.

How appropriate is it that we, as many parts of the world, honour the sanctity of mothers today, engage with a story about a silly boy and an even more reckless father? Where is the mother in all of this? One might be tempted to say that she was probably slaving over a hot stove preparing the feast, but preparing for the feast is man's work and no doubt the slaves were deployed to make it all happen—another waste of resources.

Little wonder the elder son felt a separation from his father. No doubt, he loathed his brother during all this prodigal activity. And Dad, coming out and saying, "Now, don't be like that, lad. We thought he was dead. He's back! He's alive. Come on in and rejoice!" replied, "Pigs! That's where he should have stayed, with the pigs, sharing carob pods and being just like them- filthy, unclean, and defiled."

How simple it is to identify this issue! My solicitor has a saying that is just as common among many legal firms: "When there is

a will, there is a family." Birthright is a significant concern now, just as it was in the past. The father's actions were disgraceful; he endured the shame of giving half his property away, only to have the son sell it to his neighbours and embark on a journey of debauchery. By asking for his share now, he effectively told his father, "I wish you were dead."

Yet, we are encouraged to see things from the father's perspective. The once-lost son has returned to life. He has been raised from the dead. He has been resurrected. He is now alive!

So, what prompted Jesus to share this specific parable? What relevance does it have to God's love and forgiveness?

Today's readings start with those arriving at Gilgal after over forty years in the desert. Now, they redeem their journey in the promised land and renew their covenant with God. Despite their wilderness past, they are welcomed back into a land of milk and honey. Many from Egypt have died, and now, a reborn Israel dedicates itself to God.

My specific interest lies in the complete narrative of chapters 15 and 16 of Luke's Gospel. As many of Jesus's stories do, it begins with everyone's favourite gossipers and community

judges, the Pharisees. The question should be, "What is getting under their skin now?"

Luke 11:1 sets the scene: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." The sinners are further characterised by Luke as being in the company of, wait for it, tax collectors. In response, Jesus shares three stories for them to ponder over their meals, undoubtedly resulting in considerable indigestion.

The first parable is the Parable of the Lost Sheep. Leaving the ninety-nine behind, the shepherd went out to find the lost one. Upon finding the lost sheep, he picks it up and carries it back to the pen on his shoulders. "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. Let's hear it for the sheep!

In the esteemed company of tax collectors and Pharisees, who tended to spend money on self-glorification while imposing laws on others, they are presented with the Parable of the Lost Shekel.

Often, we assume that the term "coin" refers to a penny. However, the parable is quite clear; it was a silver coin, not a

denarius or gerah. One shekel was approximately the monthly wage of a labourer and held significant value to recover. You can almost see the nods of understanding within the crowd. Indeed, that would be worth commemorating.

They encounter the story of a man with two sons. Following Trinity Sunday, another parable about a deceitful manager unfolds, concluding with Jesus stating, “You cannot serve both God and wealth.” Jesus emphasises that while they understand the law, nothing within it has changed- no exceptions allowed. He critiques divorce loopholes and recounts Abraham and Lazarus, illustrating that even if someone returned from the dead to warn them against prioritising wealth over integrity, they wouldn’t believe it!

A sheep is found and safely returned to the flock. A shameful act by a son who truly wishes for his father's demise and squanders the inheritance is accepted from a distance and welcomed back home. The other son feels resentful and cannot share in his father’s joy over the returned son. Jesus underscores the steward's dishonesty, clarifies the essence of the law, and points out that even if a messenger of God were to rise from the dead, it would not change their behaviour.

From the perspective of wandering Israelis returning home and creating a community founded on God’s love and generosity, they once again lose their way and the law. This entire sequence

is captured in the exchange from Luke 16: “‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.’”

So, how are we with God? With whom do we identify? A shepherd, a wealthy woman, a wayward father and son, and an annoyed older brother. Deceit to escape imprisonment, manipulation of the laws, unfair divorces, and disregarding the voice of the once-deceased.

On Mothering Sunday, we begin with the words 'Rejoice!' The father of us all—the mother bearer of life. The Spirit of wisdom and encouragement calls us to return.

Do not worry about whether the lost have a place in God's kingdom. That is God’s business. We must set our hearts right. As we are reminded on Ash Wednesday, we must repent and believe in the Gospel.

Christ, whose insistent call disturbs our settled lives: give us discernment to hear your word, grace to relinquish our tasks, and courage to follow empty-handed wherever you may lead, so that the voice of your gospel may reach to the ends of the earth. Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What does the term 'prodigal' mean, and how does it apply to the characters in the parable of the Prodigal Son?

The sermon discusses how the term 'prodigal' describes both the youngest son and, from the elder son's perspective, their father highlights the reckless waste of resources.

How do you think the concept of being 'prodigal' might relate to our own choices and behaviours in life?

Why do you think the father welcomed the youngest son back with such a celebration after his reckless spending?

The sermon emphasises the father's joy at his son's return to life, suggesting forgiveness and unconditional love.

Can you think of a time when you forgave someone for a mistake? How did that experience affect your relationship with that person?

In what ways does the elder son's reaction to his brother's return reflect common human feelings towards fairness and injustice?

The sermon discusses the elder son's annoyance at his father's generosity towards the son who had wasted his inheritance. Have you ever felt like you were unfairly treated compared to someone else?

How did you respond to those feelings?

How does the story of the Prodigal Son connect to the idea of redemption and new beginnings, as mentioned in the sermon?

The sermon illustrates the son's return as a form of resurrection or being brought back to life, celebrating new beginnings. What areas of your life could use a fresh start or a chance at redemption?

What does the phrase from Luke 16, 'for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God,' mean in the context of the sermon?

The sermon highlights how this saying reflects the disparity between human values and God's values, especially in the context of the parables shared. How can we ensure that our values align more closely with what we understand to be God's values in our daily lives?

SIMPLER QUESTIONS

- What does the word "prodigal" mean to you?
 - This relates to the beginning of the sermon, where the speaker clarified the term "prodigal" and its implications.
- How do you think the father felt when his son returned home?
 - This question stems from discussing the father's love and joy in welcoming back his son.
- Why do you think the elder brother was so upset about the celebration?
 - This relates to the elder brother's jealousy and feelings of injustice discussed in the sermon.
- What can we learn from the father's actions in the story?
 - This connects to the key message about forgiveness and unconditional love presented in the sermon.
- How can we apply the lessons from this parable to our own lives?
 - As the sermon emphasises, this relates to the overall call to reflect on our relationships and how we treat others.



Walking on the sacred earth lightly

This five-day Devotional will be taking a deeper dive into the sermon from this weekend.

Day 1 *Luke 15:11-32*

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we are confronted with the themes of loss, repentance, and grace. The youngest son, driven by selfish desires, sought his inheritance and wasted it on reckless living. This story is a powerful reminder that forgiveness is always available upon return, regardless of how far one strays from the path. The father of his wayward son exemplifies divine love that overflows with compassion and understanding, illustrating that it is never too late to return home.

Reflecting on this parable, we see ourselves in both the Prodigal Son and the elder brother. The journey of faith is often marked by moments of wandering amid life's distractions. However, the welcoming arms of our father also mark it and celebrate every step we take back toward Him. The resurrection of the lost into life anew echoes the heart of the Gospel—the radical acceptance and love waiting at home.

- What aspects of your life feel distant from God?
- How do you identify with the elder brother in this parable?
- In what ways can you extend grace to others who have erred?
- Pray for a heart that seeks forgiveness and grace.
- Reflect on areas where you must let go and return to God.

Day 2 *Luke 15:4-7*

The parable of the Lost Sheep illustrates God's deep value of each individual; He leaves the ninety-nine to seek out the lost one. This action encompasses the loving pursuit of our Saviour and showcases God's desire to reconcile every lost soul into His fold. In our lives, we sometimes feel overlooked or lost amidst the crowd, yet this passage reminds us that we are always seen, sought after, and cherished by our Creator. As we consider the implications of this story, let us focus on God's nature as the Shepherd who relentlessly seeks out those who have wandered away, emphasising his desire for inclusivity and love. By understanding our worth in His eyes, we can find solace even in our darkest moments, knowing that his pursuit of us never ceases.



- How does the image of the Shepherd seeking the lost resonate with your journey?
- In what areas of your life do you feel lost or overlooked?
- How can you be a source of love and support for someone who feels lost?
- Ask God to open your heart to those who have wandered away.
- Pray for the courage to reach out to those who are hurting and lost.

Day 3

Luke 15:8-10

The parable of the Lost Coin further exemplifies the theme of recovery and the rejoicing that follows. The woman who loses one of her ten coins represents God's response to our lostness; she diligently searches until she finds what is precious. Each coin signifies a life that bears value in the eyes of God, emphasising that no one is insignificant or without worth. Through this lens, we understand that God celebrates the recovery of lost people and the unwavering determination to seek them out.

This parable urges us to reflect on our diligence in reaching out to others and rekindling relationships that may have faded or become strained. Our faith should spur us into action to uncover and celebrate every life restored.

- What do you consider valuable in your spiritual life?
- How does it feel to know that God is searching for those who may feel lost?
- Who in your life may need a similar diligent search or encouragement?
- Thank God for his relentless pursuit of you and others.
- Pray for opportunities to restore and celebrate relationships in your life.

Day 4

Luke 15:1-2

At the beginning of this narrative, we see the Pharisees criticising Jesus for associating with sinners and tax collectors. Their disdain reveals a critical attitude toward those they deem unworthy of grace and acceptance. This story beckons us to examine our hearts regarding our perceptions of others. Are we, too, prone to create barriers between ourselves and those who seem different or less deserving of forgiveness?

God calls us to embrace the marginalised and reflect his love in a world

that often pushes others away. Each interaction is an opportunity to demonstrate grace, reminding us that Jesus came to save the lost, not the righteous. The challenge lies in embodying the welcoming nature of our faith and extending love to individuals from all walks of life.

- What preconceived notions do you have about people outside your faith community?
- How can you practice welcoming and accepting love toward those who differ from you?
- In what ways can your faith community be more inclusive?
- Pray for a heart that reflects God's love without judgment.
- Reflect on ways to reach out to marginalised communities in your area.

Day 5

Luke 16:15

In this passage, the tension between societal values and God's kingdom becomes starkly apparent. Jesus challenges the Pharisees and questions how they justify themselves in front of others, contrasting their actions with God's knowledge of their hearts. This is a profound reminder that our external appearances and behaviours should align with our internal beliefs and motivations. As we approach the end of this devotional, let us reflect on how our lives align with God's heart.

Are we serving wealth and status, or are we committed to living out God's teachings of love and integrity? True worth is found not in earthly gains but in our relationship with God and how we treat others as reflections of his love.

- How can you ensure that your actions reflect the true nature of your heart?
- In what ways are you tempted to prioritise earthly matters over spiritual growth?
- What steps can you take this week to align your life more closely with God's values?
- Ask God for discernment in your decision-making processes.
- Pray for strength to remain true to your faith amidst worldly pressures.

End notes and further reading

Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke (St Paul's Press)
 The Gospel of Matthew
 The Gospel of John

Tannehill, Robert C, **Narrative Unity Luke Acts Vol: A Literary Interpretation: Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke.**, Augsburg Fortress Publishers 199

N.T. Wright

Andrew's Version: <https://substack.com/@abmcg>

Bible Hub etc



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