

**The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain**  
**Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church**  
**Chattanooga, TN**  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year C): March 27, 2022**

*Joshua 5:9–12*

*Psalm 32*

*2 Corinthians 5:16–21*

*Luke 15:1–3, 11b–32*

The conclusion of the Parable of the Prodigal Son inevitably reminds us of the beloved hymn, “Amazing Grace,” and is undoubtedly the source of its famous line, “I once was lost, but now am found.” To the angry and offended older brother, the compassionate and patient father says: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; *he was lost and has been found.*” And I will come back to this connection between parable and hymn in due course.

But first let me sound like a seminary professor for just a moment. As you all know, there are four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The first three are often known as the “synoptic” gospels: “synoptic” means a general or comprehensive view, or looking at everything altogether, hence the more familiar word “synopsis.” There is a very close literary relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in that they all share a lot of similar or even *exactly identical* material, whereas John is an almost entirely separate textual tradition. So what biblical scholars call “the synoptic problem” deals specifically with the similarities and differences between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Most scholars now think that Mark was written first, and that both Matthew and Luke read Mark before adding their own distinctive material.

But here’s my point: the Parable of the Prodigal Son is only found in Luke. Assuming that he didn’t just make it up himself, which is highly unlikely, it thus seems that Luke had access to a source of Jesus material that neither Mark nor Matthew nor even John knew about. This parable is truly one of the greatest stories not just in the New Testament but in the whole history of world literature, and what it tells us about both divine and human nature is profound and priceless. It’s thus inconceivable that the other gospel writers knew of this parable and yet decided *not* to include it. Luke’s source for his distinctive Jesus material remains open to debate and is the sort of thing that scholars argue about continuously, but again my point right now is simply to thank St. Luke for preserving this particular parable for posterity.

I called it the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.” This is its most common name, because the opening account of the rebellious younger brother’s departure and return is so dramatic, and is therefore most often depicted in art, as in Rembrandt’s well-known painting, for example. And indeed sometimes the telling of the parable stops right there, with verse 24, and never goes on to the actual conclusion. But I suspect that for many of us those final verses about the ungrateful older brother are actually more relevant to our own lives and practice of the Christian faith.

I mean, yes, there are indeed lots of people like the younger brother who live wild, crazy, dissolute lives involving all sorts of substances and behaviors that we don’t normally talk about in church, who then have sudden radical life-changing conversion experiences that totally reorient them into Christian faith and practice. And maybe that’s indeed your story, in which case God be praised for God’s great mercy. But, again, I think the older brother speaks for at least many of us when he complains about what seems to be unfair preferential treatment after the bad son’s return to favor. Put differently, we all sing “Amazing Grace” (which is 671 in our hymnal), but how many of us can honestly say “I once was *lost*, but now am found, was *blind*, but now I see”? Aren’t many of us more like the older brother, who as the father says, has “always been with” him as a faithful son of the household? Are we letting one kind of dramatic religious conversion set the script for everyone? And are we in danger of becoming estranged and resentful as a result?

I think the solution to this dilemma is to see that the older brother’s goodness is *just as much* the result of “amazing grace” as the younger brother’s repentance. Regardless of our past, yes, we can all sing “Amazing Grace” because we have *all* been saved by God’s love and mercy, even if for some of us that means we have been saved from ever being a prodigal child to begin with. Hence the familiar and true saying: “There but for the grace of God go I.” And, again regardless of our past, we all *do* need to be given the gift of sight in order to see the divine love and mercy in our lives. Indeed, in the parable both brothers are *equally blind* to the father’s grace and goodness toward them, and therefore the father needs for *both* of them to see and acknowledge this fundamental reality. That’s what’s so brilliant about the parable, which is not just about the prodigal son after all, which is why some prefer to call it the “Parable of the Two Brothers” or the “Parable of the Loving Father.”

Having noted the connection between this parable and “Amazing Grace,” I’d like to close by playing a contemporary setting of the hymn. It’s rather unusual, with vocals by Aaron Neville of the Neville Brothers, an African-American R&B singer, and electronic ambient background by Daniel Lanois, a Canadian musician and record producer, but I think it well expresses the deep joy of receiving God’s amazing grace.