

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity | 2026
By Fr. Hayden A. Butler

The Lessons for today build on the fact of our adoption as God's children that we received in the Epistle last Sunday. As St. Paul wrote, we have received the Spirit of adoption as children of God by which we cry out, 'Abba, Father.' This adoption, as he continues, has made us coheirs with Christ and partakers of His divine and inexhaustible inheritance. This morning, our Lessons center on the temptation to squander that inheritance through unruly desires.

In the Gospel Lesson, we hear again the well-known parable of the father and his two sons. The prodigal demands his inheritance only to squander it and listlessly wander abroad. Only when the miserable consequences of his prodigality fall upon him does he come to himself, returning home to be received through the steadfast love of his father. By contrast, the father's other son remains home in dutiful service, but inwardly burns with resentment toward his father because he was not given his inheritance in the manner he expected. Moreover, the gracious reception of his wayward brother amplifies that resentment, driving him into the outer darkness while the household celebrates the lost son's return. In both, we see one wrong way to receive an inheritance: the one seizes upon it and carelessly loses it; the other angrily covets it while refusing to enjoy it. Both are in need of knowing again the inheritance for what it is: a gift of the father's love for them. Both are in need of knowing their father through their inheritance.

In the Epistle Lesson, St. Paul illuminates this problem through a midrash-style commentary on Israel's conduct in the wilderness after the Exodus. In a flyover of their initial tests and failures of faithfulness, Paul pays special attention to the privileges offered them in their wanderings, how they ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink in the wilderness, and how the source of this—though they did not recognize it—was actually Christ, who presented Himself to them as a rock that went with them in their journey. As we recall from our reading of Exodus, this rock bore witness to the Israelites' frequent misuse of their special privileges: that they ate and drank and were satisfied, only to use this nourishment to complain against the Lord, worship idols, denounce Moses, and engage in orgiastic revelries. As God's special people, they used His gifts with prodigality. Yet we also remember how some reacted with zealous anger toward their brethren, seeking to destroy them for their misdoings, growing in angry resentment for their unfaithfulness. Eventually, this resulted in even Moses Himself striking the rock (which again was Christ) and condemning himself through his excessive, scrupulous anger. Like the father's two sons, the Israelites were overcome through temptation to both excess and jealousy despite the privileges they enjoyed as the children of God.

Both Lessons offer us a stern warning. In the Gospel, the prodigal son is chastised by his miserable hunger and squalor to the point that they become the beginning of his homecoming. As much as readings focus on the foolishness of his actions, when the situation is clearly hopeless,

he returns home with humility. By contrast, the Corinthians have received their inheritance, and despite seeing the vanity of their own prodigal living among the cosmopolitan pleasures of Corinth, struggle not to continue indulging in them. Yet, as Paul notes, what we read of the ancient Israelites is written as an example that still obtains in the Christian life. We must not presume to eat and drink of Christ while still trying to enjoy the corrupt delights of the world. To do so would be as if the prodigal son, after being received graciously by his father, went back to his reckless living. At the same time, we cannot become the other brother of the parable, consumed with indignation that our heavenly father is merciful to sinners, and particularly those sinners we most define ourselves against, whom we insist are the least like us. Otherwise, should the Lord prove gracious to them, we will find ourselves at odds with the Lord as well, forced to refuse Him in order to preserve our pious resentments. As St. Paul writes, “let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall.” Even Moses could forget himself and strike the rock that nourished him. Even those who most anticipated Christ’s coming cried out to crucify Him.

Yet the Lessons this morning also offer us comfort and encouragement. As St. Paul notes, there is no trial of the soul that we experience that is not common to us all. At some point, we will face the trial of the prodigal as well as his brother, seeking our inheritance and forgetting our father. At some point, we will face the trials of the Israelites, knowing we are provided for by the Lord yet entertaining petty lusts, jealousies, infidelities, and idolatries. We will be tempted to use His provision to fuel our desires to live without need of Him. Yet for their failures, the father never ceases to seek out his sons, waiting for the barest hint of their turning back to greet and embrace them. For all their wanderings of heart, the Lord never ceased to provide for His people in the wilderness. Steadfast in the midst of our repeated failures is the steadfast love of God in Christ, who feeds us with Himself. So while we may never presume upon the grace of our inheritance to fuel our delusions of independence and grandeur, we may rely on the faithful love of our heavenly father and the love of Christ our Lord and heavenly brother. For He never disparages our homecoming, instead insisting that just as all that His father has is His, so all that is His will be ours.

Thus, with the prodigal this morning, from our place in the pews where we sit in the miseries of unfulfilled and unfillable desires, let us again arise and go to our father. And let us usher each other to the Eucharistic feast with joy that, once again, we who were dead are alive again, and we who were lost are now found.