

I can't hear those opening chords of "Streets of Philadelphia" without thinking of the opening shots of the music video that Jonathan Demme directed when the movie for which Springsteen wrote the song came out – the camera zooms in from above City Hall, glides over the glimmering skyscrapers of the Philadelphia skyline. You've got these iconic, almost clichéd images of city life: children playing in fountains, suspension bridges leaping over the Delaware River, schoolkids filing reverently past the Liberty Bell. And then the screen goes completely blue, nothing but sky. And then slowly, the camera moves down through light cloud cover over the City, settling this time not on downtown with its glitter and glamour, but on a trashed inner-city scene: an abandoned lot of weeds, scrubby bushes, and scattered stone. Deteriorating houses. Homeless guys warming themselves over a makeshift fire. And across this equally iconic image of urban blight Springsteen is walking, unkempt and uncombed.

This music is sort of the quintessential music of the city. That's not a surprise - that the Poet of Asbury Park, the boy who grew up in Long

Branch, the Bard of the Garden State – it's not a surprise that his is a music that comes up from the pavement, whether it's Newark or New York or Philadelphia or Portland.

Wikipedia told me this week that Springsteen didn't pre-record his vocals for "Streets of Philadelphia" in the studio when they were shooting this video; they wired him for sound when they shot the film and what you hear is what he's actually singing as he walks through this barren urban landscape: "I was bruised and battered and I couldn't tell what I felt. I was unrecognizable to myself. Saw my reflection in the window; I didn't know my own face. Oh Brother, are you gonna leave me wasting away on the streets of Philadelphia? Aint no angel gonna greet me – it's just you and I, my friend. My clothes don't fit me no more. I've walked a thousand miles just to slip this skin."

It occurred to me as we were preparing for this service that THAT is the song of the Prodigal Son. Isn't it? "The night has fallen, I'm lying awake, I can feel myself fading away – so receive me, brother, with your

faithless kiss – or will we leave each other alone like this on the streets of Philadelphia?”

Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son – or the parable of the two brothers, the parable of the waiting father, the parable of the dysfunctional family – however you want to refer to it, that’s a parable that most of us have at least a glancing acquaintance with, even those of us who didn’t grow up in Church and for whom the Bible is this mysterious document that gets used and abused by people we’d rather not have very much to do with. There’s a way in which this story – the younger son who goes off into the world with his inheritance, messes up royally and then returns home to be welcomed back into the fold – that’s a story that’s kind of entered our national consciousness; one preacher has noted that, at least the way American Christians often tell it, the story of the Prodigal Son is a very American story, full of the kind of iconic American characters we recognize as soon as we see them – the wastrel son, the long-suffering parent, the rugged individualist – these are some of the same characters

that crop up in Springsteen's music, which I think is part of the reason why his music strikes us as so quintessentially American.

But the great thing about parables, at least the great thing about the parables of Jesus, is that they're infinitely malleable, full of surprises, never exhausted by one interpretation. And, for my money, there are really two stories going on here, in today's parable – there are a lot more than two, but there are two that interest me tonight. There's the story of the prodigal, the wastrel son who returns home. And there's the story of the elder son, the first born, the good kid who ends up bitter and angry. Because Jesus is really telling this story to two audiences. It's the Pharisees, the religious leaders, who ask for it – they're upset that Jesus is hanging around with undesirables, and so he tells them this parable. But the people that upset the religious leaders – the women and men of dubious reputation – they're hanging around too – in fact, they're hanging on his every word. They're right there, listening to Jesus, as he tells this parable, ostensibly to the religious leaders. But it's for them, too. I think Jesus is setting up this parable of two sons, and he's telling

it to both sons – to the wastrels and the junkies and the prostitutes on one side of him, and the religious leaders on the other side. Both of those groups are in this parable.

And because tonight we're singing the music of the Boss, because it's Saturday night and not Sunday morning, because I don't know what brought you out tonight – maybe you're just curious, maybe you come to Trinity regularly, maybe you haven't set foot inside a church in years. I don't know. I'm just gonna guess – I'm gonna hope – that, tonight of all nights, I'm not preaching to the choir. Tonight, the parable that I want to hear is the one that Jesus tells to the junkies and the whores.

Even for those of us who grew up in church, staked our whole life on the institution – I mean, we think we're supposed to identify with the older brother, the one who throws a fit. But we can talk about that parable – the parable of the good son – we can talk about that tomorrow morning – and, because I'm preaching tomorrow morning, we will. I wonder if maybe, if not on Sunday morning than maybe on Saturday night, maybe the call for us is to see ourselves in the person of this younger brother,

the one who demands his inheritance, sells of his portion of the family farm and brings great shame on his family, goes off into the big world and just...screws up mightily. The image in the parable – the way we know this kid has hit rock bottom – is when he's longing – he's salivating – for the corncobs in the pigs slop, and that's a pretty devastating image. I wonder what that image looks like to you. What's rock bottom for you? A failed marriage? Losing your job? Waking up one morning with no idea of where you are or what you did the night before?

Living in the city means that we live surrounded by prodigal sons.

That's obvious on one level...

You come off the 405 right here at Glisan and Everett, and there's that guy – you know who I mean? Even pennies help? And I wonder - where's his dad? Y'know, is he waiting at home, longing for his son to come scuffling up the road, bruised and battered and defeated, so he can run out and embrace him and bring him back in? I wonder. I don't

know that guy's story. But I know that we are surrounded by prodigal sons.

Because living in the city means that it's not just the people out on the street, the guys who sleep on the steps of this cathedral – it's not just the guys carrying signs who are prodigals. It's the guy sitting next to you in the boardroom. The couple who lives in the apartment above yours.

The skinny girl working away at her laptop in the coffee shop. That kid you see at Powells. The couple sitting in front of you at the play. We're all living on top of each other in this City. We're cheek by jowl, we're bumping into each other on the sidewalk.

So the parable that I want to hear tonight is the parable that reminds me I am just as much a prodigal son as the guy carrying the sign that says "Even Pennies Help." His corncob might be a little more dramatic than mine, our circumstances are not the same. But we're both wastrels, right? We both know what failure looks like.

It's an easy gesture to make, this identification with the poor and the hungry – it's an easy, sentimental gesture to make, “oh, we're all part of one family, there but for the grace of God go I, we're all the same, deep down.” It's sentimental and maybe it's a little bit cheap. But in this context, in the context of this parable, I feel like that's where Jesus is pushing us. He's using the parable of the prodigal son to cause these religious leaders to take a hard look in the mirror and see that the men and women of dubious reputation who are hanging around Jesus? The junkies and the whores? That's who they really are. Prodigal sons, every one of 'em, major screwups, hiding behind their robes and finery and prestige. That's where St. Paul is going in his letter to the Corinthians that we read earlier tonight: “One man died for everybody,” he says, “that puts everybody in the same boat. We don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once, and got it all wrong. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone who is united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone, a new life burgeons. Look at it!”

See, this is where some preachers will start to get really preachy, right? It's the big temptation in the parable of the prodigal son – that we make a big deal out of the fact that the son had to come to his senses, had to be ready to repent before his father could let him back in. I've heard this parable preached that way, and I think it's an egregious misreading of what Jesus is saying. One scholar has pointed out that the formula that the younger son plans on using to apologize, "Father, I've sinned against God and before you" – that's the same formula that Pharaoh uses in the book of Exodus when he's trying to get Moses off his back. It's not exactly the iconic image of a heartfelt apology, this is no repentant sinner's prayer. I think this is a desperate son willing to say whatever he needs to say to come in from the cold. So I don't think this is a parable about genuine repentance, about what we need to do in order to get square with God. I think this is a parable about how the initiative is always God's. The son is coming down the road, and the Father doesn't stand by the gate with his arms crossed until the Son has gotten down on his knees and made a suitable apology. This father is running off down the road like a little girl, sandals flapping, he doesn't even care what his

son has to say, he's already got his arm around him, bring him clean clothes, put my robe on him, kill the fatted calf, the whole bit. This is not a parable about making proper restitution or repentance. It's about coming home. With no questions asked.

Tonight's service is all about Outreach – we're doing it partially as a celebration of Outreach month here at Trinity, the offering will go entirely towards our feeding ministry, which served close to 20,000 meals last year. And it's easy to take on a kind of noblesse oblige kind of orientation when we start talking about why Christians do things like feed the hungry and provide shelter for the homeless. We have stuff, they don't, so we have an obligation to help. And there's nothing wrong with that necessarily – especially if it gets people fed and housed, the ends do justify the means to an extent. But there's no Jesus in noblesse oblige. In our day, I think noblesse oblige often translates into liberal guilt, and I have learned in my very brief sojourn on this earth to be extremely suspicious of liberal guilt.

Christians feed people because we know that we're hungry too. And if we've lost touch with what it means to be hungry – what it means to be desperate, what it means to long for the corncocks that the pigs are getting slopped with – brother, here we are in the middle of a city in which the people who can remind us what that's like are all around us. We're worshipping tonight on one of the most active blocks for prostitution and drug trafficking in this city. The reality of human desperation literally has us surrounded here. Don't let the beautiful stained glass windows fool you – we are in the streets of Philadelphia tonight.

And this is where you and I belong. This is home for us. That's where this parable ends, as unsatisfying and tense an ending as it is, with this older brother who refuses to come to the party, it doesn't end happily - but that doesn't make the point any less surprising: the home of the wastrel son and the home of the dutiful successful son is the same place. It's a Cathedral, that's what the father welcomes his prodigal son back inside: a Cathedral. A house for everybody. A place where everybody

gets fed, because we're all in the same boat, at the end of the day.

Whether we've lost touch with it or not, we all know what it means to be a failure. We all know what it means to be starving – for love, for affection, for approval, for meaningful work, for food and water. We know what that feels like. That's why we reach out – that's where outreach comes from. It's literally about reaching out, like the father does in this parable, reaching out from our isolation and our selfishness and whatever kind of stone walls we've built around up around us, whether they're literal or not – bringing people back home before the words are even out of their mouth.

The city's in ruins, right? It is, forget about the veneer of the skyscrapers and the manicured parks, my city's in ruins. There's a blood red circle on the cold dark ground and the rain is falling down, the church doors blown open and I can hear the organ's song but the congregation's gone. And what's the answer? C'mon, rise up! With these hands, the band sang at the beginning of the service, with these hands. That's what outreach is about – with these hands. Not because

we're older sons who have experienced success and are ready to give back – no, because we're prodigal sons, every one of us, and we know what it's like to be welcomed home.

So if no one's ever said this to you, let me say it, from this pulpit, in God's house, on behalf of the God whom I worship, the God in whom I have staked my life: I don't care who you are, I don't care what you've done, I don't care what you're going to do with the rest of your Saturday night, or the rest of your life – doesn't matter: there is a place for you here. There is a place for you at this altar. This altar is where our ministry of feeding starts from, this is a place where we all come to get fed. And there is a place for you here. There is a place for you here.