Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world: Evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Most often, when we hear this story from the Gospel of Luke, our attention is naturally directed to the great drama of this prodigal, profligate younger son and his incredibly gracious, merciful father. This morning, however, I want to reflect with you on that other son hanging out in the background of this story: the elder son. The faithful firstborn son who did everything right, stuck to the book, lived a clean life. According to the story, this son—the sober, steadfast, dependable son—is exactly where we would expect to find him. While the younger intemperate brother is off in Vegas squandering his inheritance on gambling, booze, and, um, “companions,” thinking nothing of his family and only of himself, the elder upright brother is, of course, back home on the farm. Sure, there is a part of him that would like to let loose, but he doesn’t—he can’t—give himself that permission. Instead, he sticks by his father and attends to the family affairs. He thinks not first of himself, but the needs of the whole. He looks after his aging parents, he toils on the farm; day in, day out. It is thankless work, but he doesn’t mind (or at least that’s what he tells himself). He’s not in it for the rewards and accolades. He just does what he does because it’s the right thing to do.

And he’s doing what he’s doing, amid his daily toils on the family farm, when he hears the music and dancing. He wonders aloud about what’s going on. And his hired hand breaks the news: “Your brother is back.” I’m not sure if he heard the rest of the sentence; that was enough. His heart sank. Of course, deep down inside, he loved his brother. He did. Perhaps he still does. But there are only so many times one can be hurt, betrayed, disappointed. There are only so many chances you can give a person before you realize that doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is, as the old adage goes, the very definition of insanity. Let’s just say, the elder son is not about to run up to the house and join the party. Can you blame him?

In fact, he’s livid. And summarily refuses to join the throngs who are acting as if his younger dissipated brother has actually accomplished something by running out of money and coming home tail-between-legs. Does anyone else here see the dynamic? Is he nuts? Or is his father, and everyone else up there popping open the champagne, just a little naïve?

His father comes to plead with the elder brother to join the party. And that’s when he loses it.

Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a gift certificate to PF Chang’s so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with “companions,” you rent a party tent and have Cin Cin cater a shindig for him!

The father responds by assuring him that there is no favoritism being shown here: “Son, you are always with me,” he says, stressing, “all that is mine is yours.” There is no favor being withheld from the older, responsible son. It’s just that the younger, profligate son has now come home: “was dead and has come to life; was lost and has been found.”

This is, of course, just a parable. A story. A fable. But still, it is so real.
The focus here is usually and rightly on the younger, immoderate son. His wantonness, his debauchery, his self-indulgence. He is a stand-in for our own self-indulgent impulses, if at the extreme. And, yes, we are supposed to see ourselves in him, especially in this Lenten season leading up to Easter, when we are particularly mindful of our own sin, our own excess, our own immoderation, our own intemperance—and the impact thereof not just on us and our soul, but the impact of our sin, our excess, our immoderation, our intemperance on our families, our friends, on those we love, indeed, the impact on our wider world. It is our intemperance, yours and mine, that has already irrevocably changed our climate—squandering the inheritance of generations to come. So, yes, we are to see ourselves in the younger son.

And, yes, we are to see our Heavenly Father. Despite us utterly squandering the manifold gifts of this life, indeed this creation, completely wasting our inheritance, we are to see a Father who is always ready to forgive us and welcome us home, welcome us back into the family, back into the fold. And not just passively acquiescing to our return, but running out to meet us, as if always already anticipating our return, running out to embrace us and kiss us—throwing a lavish party to welcome us home. So, yes, we are to see a glimpse of God's mercy, forgiveness, and love in the father.

And yet too, we are to see ourselves in the elder, dutiful son. The son who has tried hard to do what is right simply because it is right. The son who had opportunities to indulge wantonly but chose instead the way of conscientiousness, self-sacrifice, service. The elder, dutiful son who doesn't run out to greet his younger, burnout brother; the elder, dutiful son who is more guarded. The elder, dutiful son who, perhaps, harbors pride and resentment—overconfidence in his own uprightness, contempt for his brother's failure. Even if a paragon of sobriety, sensibility, and steadfastness, there is a spiritual danger lurking here inside him too: the spiritual danger of smug superiority, discourtesy towards our sister or brother we deem less. There is the spiritual danger of unforgiveness.

That is the hardest line of our Lord’s prayer: “forgive us our trespasses… as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Forgive us our trespasses, so far so good. We all know, I hope, that we are imperfect. Even if we don't particularly like the word “sin,” we all know, I hope, that we fall short of the glory of God. And we all know we must, from time to time, admit our flaws, foibles, failures, ask for forgiveness, make amends. In so doing, we expect a rather automatic reply from God. Wrongs forgiven, sins expunged, absolution assured. The peace of the Lord be always with you.

But to then share with one another the sign of peace? To truly forgive those who have trespassed against us?

To forgive our wantonly wasteful sister or brother?! …when, when, when we didn't even get a gift certificate to PF Chang's and father is over there in a rented tent passing out Cin Cin pan-Asian finger foods with French flair after brother hit rock bottom in Vegas (having wasted his entire inheritance on slots, snuff, and, um, “companions”) and decided to come back home because he had no other options, it was that or homelessness… Seriously?!

This is the hard invitation of Lent. Not only to be mindful of our own wanton wastefulness, our own sin, and to admit our errors, to repent, return… and know ourselves as forgiven, loved, embraced by God. But also, having admitted our own imperfections, to know ourselves as forgiven… and then forgive those who trespass against us.

To celebrate and rejoice, for they have been forgiven too.

God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Amen.