

## SHADOWS OF THE PRODIGAL

It would be my guess that the story of the Prodigal Son is the most famous story in all the world. I realize there are many other stories which could compete for that title, and doubtless some of you will mention a few of them to me a little later. Whatever your own choice, the story of the Prodigal Son is always a chief contender because, generation after generation, it moves us so deeply. It doesn't seem to matter what our culture or current crisis may be, this story reaches us. That in itself is a pretty good reason to neglect preaching about it. Who needs to hear it? What could be said that hasn't already been said? On the other hand, how do great stories stay great if we no longer tell them or ponder them?

Those of you who know the drill understand instantly that there are three main characters in this story: the Prodigal Son, the Elder Brother, the Waiting Father. You also know that to get anything fresh or meaningful from this very familiar story, you must be willing to identify deeply with one of these three main characters. And since the story is so familiar, you will have to choose only one of the three at any one time or you will not be able to get deep enough for the story to truly reach you. I will try to steer you toward identifying with the Waiting Father this time. But don't go with me unless it flows that way inside you. Go with the story, and go with the Spirit. We will start out slow and work into it.

I am beginning to suspect that here in Corona del Mar, anything famous or well-known is at an automatic disadvantage. We who are over-individualized do not wish to dress, think, work, eat, believe, love – or even be saved – like the masses, the common herd. From our perspective, if everybody likes it, there must be something wrong with it. If you ask a kid from Detroit or Los Angeles what her favorite color is, it might turn out to be blue or green or even red. If you ask a kid from Corona del Mar, you are likely to get an answer like, “An off-shade cross between magenta and fuchsia – actually a tad bit more toward the magenta.” I didn't even know what we were talking about anymore. So I said, “I've heard of magenta, but don't actually know what hue that is. Is that sort of a mustard green, or more toward violet?” (I could tell right off we weren't going to be talking about any *primary* colors, and those were the only colors I could think of that weren't primary.) Of course, her eyebrows went up in that special way. Nothing rude or outlandish, just raised eyebrows. We used to call it “eyebrow swearing.” (*You stupid Galatian ...*)

But out of her mouth came this sweet explanation: “It’s a moderate-to-vivid purplish red. I rather like it on the brighter side of magenta.”

I suppose I was feeling petty, but I didn’t want ignorance to be all on my side, so, dumb as I am, I asked, “Why do they call it magenta?” “Well,” she said, just as calm as can be, “actually Magenta is a little town in Italy, not far from Milan. There was a battle there between the French and the Austrians in 1859 in this town of Magenta. A special dye was discovered that same year, so they named it for the bloodiness of that battle.” “Oh,” I said. “I think I’ll remember the color now. Who won the battle?” “The French,” she replied, “through the superior tactics of their General McMahan.” “Oh, thank you, that’s very interesting,” I said. A few steps away she turned and said, “The Sardinians were fighting on the side of the French,” as if that more completely explained the victory. “Ah, yes, of course,” I murmured.

How am I going to talk about the Prodigal Son to people whose children prefer magenta? The Prodigal Son is a primary color. The guy goofs up big-time, but he repents. Wonder of wonders, instead of returning home to scorn or abuse or rejection, he finds the open arms of his father waiting and longing to welcome him home. It does not get any more primary than that. Well, sometimes it takes blood to prove it. So maybe there is some magenta in there after all.

In any case, most of us see this as a story Jesus told to tell us about the love of God. From this story, we try to leap to some glimmer of what the love of God is like. Then if we ever find ourselves in a far country – wherever our far country is, and no matter what it is like – we know what to do about it. The story has been around for all these centuries, saying to us: “Don’t be afraid to come home. No matter what you think – no matter how hopeless, or wrong, or lonely your situation – God is eager and waiting. God wants you back – indeed he is waiting with open arms.” Of all the Christian colors, that is the most primary.

That is what everybody who knows this story knows. Not that everybody who knows it believes it – or acts on it. But the story keeps declaring it – keeps putting it out there for us – in the hope that when the right time comes, we will remember it, claim it, walk into it ... and come home.

It is noticed and claimed less evenly, I suppose, but at least serious Christians have also let the Elder Brother come into the limelight. It does

not take a very careful reading to realize that Jesus is telling this story in the midst of a fight He is having with the solid-church-member types of His own day. Some of the scribes and Pharisees are complaining about the company He keeps. Good people, they say, do not pal around with questionable characters, or characters with questionable morals. In response to this spiritual snobbery and superiority, Jesus tells three stories – about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. We have to wear pretty thick blinders to not realize that this Elder Brother is put into the story precisely so we can see ourselves reflecting back from out of this story whenever we are in the self-righteous role or attitude.

There are two lost sons in this story. One is a no-good, no-account, immoral, ungrateful skunk. The other is a proud, unloving, judgmental, ungrateful, angry, and resentful rat. Two lost sons. One has just been found. The story ends without our knowing what becomes of the other. Some of us think that means Jesus is directing this story primarily at us Elder-Brother types, asking us by means of this story: “What are *you* going to do? How do you want *your* story to end? Will you get found also, welcome your brother back, rejoin your Father, become part of the Farm (God’s Kingdom) and God’s family enterprise – maybe for the first time? It is *your* story – how will it end?” That is what Jesus always seems to be asking us Pharisees.

I think those are all standard – primary colors. I happen to think they are pretty great just the same. I don’t easily tire of pondering such things. They seem endlessly applicable in my life – and wherever I look in life, for that matter. But I couldn’t just come with simple truth to those whose children speak of magenta. I tried to doctor it up a little, make it more mysterious, get it off the beaten track: “Shadows of the Prodigal.” Light casts shadows. In this case, I do not mean to imply evil or darkness. This simple story casts endless thoughts into all manner of places. I think they are fascinating. I also think they only stay fascinating as long as we do not lose track of the primary message.

There is a new concern in our time for individual morality and behavior. All across the land, we have been struggling more and more with what we will and will not allow. It comes partly as a backlash against a period of time that seemed to cast all individual morality to the wind. “Who cares if Kennedy screws a few women on the side? He’s a great President, and he’s leading this nation to face issues that really matter.” This was said to me by a man of considerable religious stature, in a room

full of clergy, and they all seemed to agree. Twenty-five years later, a group of Navy and Marine flyers (the Tailhook Association) held a wild convention in Las Vegas, and *TIME* magazine was still talking about the repercussions three years afterwards. That would have been unthinkable in the '60s. The atmosphere has changed dramatically. And with all the headlines in recent years, some predict that we are heading for an age of moral inquisition, where people will again lose jobs and friends and families if they do not conform to an essentially puritan morality.

What corresponding changes can we expect in church life and theology if the trend keeps moving in that direction? Well, we will have to downplay compassion and mercy. Conditions for forgiveness will get more and more strict. But the strongest pressure will be at the central themes. Jesus will be seen and interpreted more and more as a teacher of morals. We will see a growing number of articles and books telling us that Jesus was carrying on a simple, grassroots Reform Movement (out of the Essene, or John the Baptist, tradition) that called people to mend their lives by adhering to a revised interpretation of Torah, with emphasis on love of neighbor. And further, we will increasingly be told that Paul and the early church added or tacked on all the fancy stuff about grace, the Gospel, the Holy Spirit, and salvation by faith. Jesus was just a profound but simple morals teacher, telling and showing us how to be "good," and all that fal-de-ral about Jesus' identity and the miracles and the Resurrection was added later by others. That is what you are going to be hearing more and more.

So from time to time, I will probably want to look in on a parable with you. Did Jesus preach and teach morality, or Gospel? Was Paul making up Christian theology, or did he pick up and work with what Jesus had truly given us?

Here is the Prodigal Son story. We all play with the story as we like, but the evidence mounts that this younger son is far worse than we realize. From a Middle Eastern perspective, the younger son hates his father. He has no interest or concern whatsoever for the family, for the clan, for the family enterprise or holdings that have nourished them for generation after generation. He wants his share *now*, for himself, and to Hell with everybody else. The father must have endured agonizing grief over a long period of time to even consider the young son's proposal. And now he is at wit's end; it is a desperate move. He must either acquiesce to the young man's demands or throw him off the farm and out of the

family permanently – disown him. For some inexplicable reason, the father is unwilling to do that. Some Near Eastern families, when asked their opinion on this matter, have expressed surprise that the young man still lived. They all thought that this father was incredibly lenient, and much too much so.

The shock effect – and Jesus never tells parables without a shock in them – is that God is pictured as a weak and overly permissive father. This young man should have been disciplined or done away with long before he got to such a sorry state. By Near Eastern standards, this story is blasphemous before the kid ever gets to the far country.

So this father does unheard-of things. Very probably he must sell off a portion of his land to give the young son his inheritance. That will reduce the holdings of the clan from then on, and be a thing of grief for the rest of the family. Certainly the Elder Brother will be greatly bothered. He will lose land he thought belonged to the clan, and the support of a brother he assumed would help keep the clan prosperous. It's no wonder that later, the Prodigal nearly dies before he risks coming home. It's no wonder that his highest hope is to gain work as a day-laborer. Even that is a high hope indeed – a hope for which he is in no way worthy. He is relatively certain that he will be thrown off the place before he even gets a chance to make his plea. But truly, he is desperate.

Can you make this out as a morality play? Is Jesus picturing God as a Being who demands righteousness before we can have any relationship or dealings with him? The young man – having no other hope – takes a chance that there is some small shred of compassion left for him in his father's heart. He goes to find out – hope against hope – before he abandons all life and hope entirely. Does he promise to make up for what he has done? There is no possibility of that. The damage is far too great; too many bridges have been burned. Sheer grace is this young man's only hope.

But he gets no stingy little version of grace. He gets stumbling into open arms, a signet ring, a fine robe, a great welcome feast of relief and delight on his behalf. *"We are saved by grace through faith."* Do you think Paul made that up? Paul was one incredible message-bearer, but no way did he invent *this* message! Paul's own message, when left to his own wisdom and training, was "arrest and kill Christians." No, Gospel was not Paul's message; he merely carried it. Gospel is from Jesus. Of course, it screams at us from the Cross, but it yells pretty loud from out of this story too. Jesus is not a teacher of morals. Nor did He ever encourage

us to break moral precepts. But His teachings are full of grace and Gospel. Paul and the early church were not trying to change the Message or turn to some new agenda. They were only trying to grasp the magnitude of what Jesus had taught and done – a thing our world has still not managed to do.

Do you ever try to imagine this story if the Elder Brother had never gone wrong? The Prodigal goes wrong in one direction, and the Elder Brother goes just as wrong in the opposite direction. But what if we had only lost one son? I try to picture this Elder Brother drawing closer to his father as they both suffer the loss and sorrow of the young son's defection. I picture them chatting together in the evening, and working the farm in the fullness of all that it stands for. And I see the Elder Brother growing in wisdom and understanding as he comprehends what his father is really like, how much he himself is loved, and all that the farm stands for and sustains. So then – in full knowledge of his own identity; in full awareness of how much he is loved; delighting in his work, in the farm, in all the ways he is able to serve, and in all the genuine friendships that have grown up out of such foundations – now the younger son returns. How then would the Elder Brother feel? Exactly like his father. That is how it should have been.

Truly, the Elder Brother is treated with just as much patient compassion and love as the younger Prodigal. With all the defiance, attitude, accusation, and bitterness the Elder Brother has displayed, a father of authority and righteousness would have rapped him one right in the mouth. But that is not at all what he gets. *“My son, you are always with me. Everything I have is yours.”* (*“All that I have is yours.”*)

Have you ever *heard* that before? I wish I could make every single one of you sit here all afternoon in absolute silence and think of nothing else, hear nothing else, believe nothing else ... just sit here and listen to God saying to you: *Everything I have is yours.* Everything I have IS YOURS.

Of course, the Elder Brother has not comprehended this at all. But the father says it anyway. It is the truth. Who knows when, or if, it will ever dawn on his closed-off, resentful, self-pitying little heart. If he gets saved, it will *also* be by grace. But he doesn't deserve it either. Nor will he ever be able to deserve it in a hundred billion years. EVERYTHING I HAVE IS YOURS.

Do we ever finally catch on and wish to emulate the Waiting Father? The story beckons and pulls and tricks and whistles, but all of it keeps leading us in that direction. And we, of course, resist. It is too much. We couldn't possibly. We shouldn't even think such thoughts.

Of course, eventually we must. (Matthew 5:48) Brand-new Christians must identify with the Prodigal and, once we learn that move, we must return to it whenever the need arises. Seasoned Christians must identify with the Elder Brother. Otherwise we forget the Gospel that saved us and we turn the church into a travesty. But eventually, sooner or later, we must identify with the Waiting Father. Otherwise none of us are waiting to welcome the Prodigals who want to come home. Otherwise there are none of us waiting to remind the Elder Brothers that they no longer have to prove anything. God in Christ will go on doing that, whatever we do. But the whole notion of the church is that we get to be part of it too.

At this very moment, there is someone on your list of acquaintances who truly needs the welcome, the forgiveness, the grace, the assurance. Be careful. Nothing in Christendom is as easy or automatic as the promoters pretend. You do not want to welcome home somebody while they are still heading for their "far country." But if you pray, and listen, and wait, and watch, the Spirit will tell you who on your list is ready. And if you stay ready and patient and listening, the Spirit will tell you *when* and *how* to greet them with open arms. And it won't just be wonderful for them.