

Reflection on the Prodigal Son

Gregg Richardson, 8/30/15

I begin by confessing that as I grow older, I find it more difficult to read scripture piously, to find in it the spiritual lessons I am expected to find. It seems that scripture either speaks to me existentially or not at all. Perhaps once you've lived a lifetime trying to discern the mystery of your own accumulated stories, the prescriptive tales of pedants and moralizers seem a bit Dick-and-Jane-ish in comparison. When I read the story of the prodigal son, I don't experience a tidy morality tale; I read it instead as the son of a father, and the father of a son. Neither relationship is simple. Neither relationship is a story with a clear beginning or end. To simplify a story so rife with unspoken complexity seems a violation of its humanism. To analogize the characters of such a story seems to trivialize it: does this parable really ask us to imagine God as a bourgeois father? What a risky step we take when we choose a metaphor!

In his fictionalized memoir of childhood, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, the German poet Rilke speaks of the tale of the prodigal son as the "legend of [the son] who did not want to be loved." As Rilke reimagines the parable, the boy is surrounded by the love of everyone in his household, he is outflanked on every side by their tender nurture, until he longs only to escape them all, eluding even the dogs whenever he flees to the fields to be alone, because they too stare at him with love in their eyes, with expectation and solicitude. "To be loved," says Rilke, "means to be consumed. To love is to give light with inexhaustible oil. To *be* loved is to pass away, to love is to endure." And so the son leaves home in order to become *not* the beloved son of his family, but to become himself.

My most important lesson as a young father was to learn how to not be my father, but also to master the Zen to *not be not my father*. As a boy, I saw my own father as a mountain, as a volcanic power. But even in my early adolescence I began to see how my father's power masked a weakness, a vulnerability, the vulnerability of a son who had lost his own father too early. To understand the culture of today's American families, you must first understand that in the 1960s, when I was an adolescent, the fear of that vulnerability was pervasive among those like my father, for whom the fierce protection of one's children from changing values was often the only acceptable expression of love available to a male. And so it was a moment of revelation for me when, as a slight, fourteen year old misfit, I found myself one day wrestled to the kitchen floor, my powerful father sitting on my chest with a pair of scissors, determined to cut my hair. He loved me. He was trying to save me, from something neither of us really understood. I was being consumed by his love. And at that moment I caught my first paradoxical glimpse of his weakness.

Life stories pass through generations. Had the father in Jesus' parable been himself a dutiful son who stayed home? Was it his weakness of spirit that kept him peering down the road, anxiously awaiting his wayward child? Did his son flee to escape that dutifully consuming love? Whose story is this, really? The story of the prodigal son, sweetened with a happy ending and a little cream and sugar? The story of a vulnerable father, who

first loses, and then, for the time being, regains control over his maturing son, to be continued next week? Is it the story of the other, the dutiful son who stays home, the perfunctory steward who holds everything together? Is this a story about God at all? How much we forfeit when we appropriate a metaphor!

Rilke says of one of his characters in *The Notebooks*, that “the strength of his transformation lay in his no longer being anybody’s son. This, in the end,” he continues, “is the strength of all young people who have gone away.” My father, at eighty-eight, is a good man. I can see him now, still peering anxiously down the road, awaiting my return. I am sixty. I am not coming home. I still love him dutifully, but I am no longer anybody’s son. I am also the father of a young adult son who has gone away. His mother asks me whether I can see how much he wants to be just like me, whether I realize how much he wants my approval. He loves me dutifully. Like all sons, he clearly sees my weaknesses. He is a little condescending, because he doesn’t yet have a son to point out his own weaknesses. I peer down the road and see him coming, and I am content, because even at a distance, I can see the strength of a son who has gone away.