

The Prodigal Son

"...I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."
(Luke 15:19)

On Sunday in our seminary chapel, I preached on the Gospel of the Prodigal Son. A number of people commented on an interpretation I shared regarding the Prodigal's well-thought-out return to his father. Although I cannot take credit for the origin of the interpretation,* I thought it might be of value to expound upon it in my weekly reflection.

Recall the Parable: When the Prodigal was at his lowest point—when he had lost everything; when he was hungry, abandoned by friends, numbered among the pigs, and shamed by all the promises of the "far country" which failed him—the Gospel tells us that he then "came to himself." At that moment, he began to plan his return to his father's house.

Significantly, the Prodigal remembered that he was once a "son." We know this, because as he developed his scenario to return home, he practiced his first line: "*Father*, I have sinned..." Clearly, he remembered the father-son relationship that he had abandoned. Further, he remembered that even though he had offended his father deeply, his father had nevertheless loved him enough to give him his inheritance and to let him go. Still, the Prodigal intended to return home *not* as a "son," but rather as a "hired servant."

What was behind his reasoning? Often, we tend to believe that the Prodigal's desire was based in humility: after all of his exploits, he considered himself unworthy to return with the dignity of a son. But might he have had an ulterior motive?

Certainly, the Prodigal recognized that even as a "hired servant," he would be better off in his father's house. He would surely enjoy better surroundings and a more pleasing environment than what he was experiencing in the pigpen. But, more importantly, by desiring to return as a hired servant, the son could maintain distance from his father not only physically, but also relationally. He could keep, so to speak, keep one foot in the father's house and one foot in the "far country." As a hired servant, he could maintain a certain independence from the father and continue to protect in his heart a spirit of rebellion against him.

Perhaps the Prodigal resisted returning as a son because to do so would have meant that he would have to adopt his former way of living—his way of life prior to his running away to a far country. He would have to sever his relationship with the "far country," and he wasn't quite willing to do that yet. To return as a "son"—with the dignity and responsibilities implied by that title—required much more than he wanted to give. He wanted to return, but without bearing his duties as a son.

The Prodigal's ingenious plan matches the reality of our own hearts. We, who are members of God's house, His Church, still desire to live in both worlds. We continue to cater to the "old man" in our hearts. Our repentance, our return, is often imperfect like his. We, too, wish to return to the Father, but conditionally, under our own terms. The terms may be clear in our

own mind or they may be hidden in our subconscious. But they do exist; and, they do prevent us from being adopted "sons" of our heavenly Father.

Of course, we know that the father in the parable refused to receive the Prodigal as a hired servant. Instead, he received him with all the honors and responsibilities of a Beloved Son. In the father's eyes, the Prodigal was a son and nothing could change that. Can anything change the fact that all of us, both male and female, are "sons of the Most High" (Luke 6:35), with not only the dignity but also the responsibility attached to that title?

We are quickly approaching Great Lent, which is a time to recognize how deaf we have been to the voice of God's love; a time to recognize the many ways we have chosen to travel to and live in the "far country." The inner conflict we experience in our hearts between the Father's house and the "far country"—what has been called "unseen warfare"—will take on a greater clarity during the Fast. And we will have the opportunity, once again, to ask ourselves "To whom to do we belong?"

* The original interpretation came from Henri Nouwen, in his work *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Meditation on Fathers, Brothers, and Sons*.

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