

A Man Had Two Sons

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 11, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Laetare. The word even sounds like what it signifies. In the midst of Lent with all its somberness, its awareness of the power of sin, its call to conversion which is never an easy call, we hear this word and it awakens in us the sense that the darkness will pass. Laetare Sunday is like the light a half hour before sunrise, starting to push back the darkness, but not yet.

This year, Laetare Sunday brought with it the greatest of parables: The Prodigal. Every morning, I sit in my study and write this column with a copy of Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal before me. Charles Peguy, in his epic poem "Portal of the Mystery of Hope," reflects on this parable. The entire poem is one of the most moving things ever written, but these are the words with which he considers the Prodigal:

For fourteen hundred, for two thousand years it has made innumerable
men cry.

Through the centuries and through the centuries.

Innumerable Christians.

It has touched a unique place in man's heart, a secret place, a
mysterious place.

(It reaches the heart.)

A place that's accessible to the others.

There may not even exist a place that's more inward and more
profound.

Innumerable men, from its first telling, innumerable Christian have
cried over it.

(Unless they had a heart of stone.)

Have cried because of it.

Through the centuries men will cry.

Just by thinking about it, just by seeing it, who could,

Who could be capable of holding back their tears.

Through the centuries, through eternity men will cry over it; because

of it.

Whether they be believers or unbelievers.

Through eternity, until judgment day.

Up to the judgment itself, through the judgment. And

It's the word of Jesus that has carried the farthest, my child.

It's the one that's had the greatest luck.

Temporal luck. Eternal luck.

It has awakened in the heart a certain point of resonance

A special resonance.

It has also been especially fortunate,

It's famous even among the impious.

It has found, even with them, a point of entry.

Alone perhaps it has remained driven into the heart of the impious

Like a nail of tenderness.

Then he said: A man had two sons.

And he who hears it for the hundredth time,

It's as if it were the first time.

That he heard it.

A man had two sons. It is beautiful in Luke. It is beautiful everywhere.

It's not only in Luke, it's everywhere.

It's beautiful on earth and in heaven. It's beautiful everywhere.

Just by thinking about it, a sob rises in your throat.

It's the word of Jesus that had had the greatest effect

On the world.

That has found the deepest resonance

In the world and in man.

In the heart of man.

Yesterday, at Mass, the preacher brought to light something I had never noticed before, the gentle way the father corrects the angry elder son who, quite understandably in human terms, feels aggrieved. The son expresses his disgust by referring to "your son" but the father responds by calling the prodigal "your brother." Just as the father runs out to greet the Prodigal and only barely lets him speak his well-rehearsed lines of contrition, so, too, the father does not upbraid the older son, but simply reminds him of the relationship that they share. The gentleness of the father is as remarkable as his mercy.

I look at many of the leaders of the Church today and I wonder if they see themselves in any of these three characters in the parable. The culture warriors seem to me to fit the sensibilities of the older son in significant ways. They, too, feel that the father's love is something finite, that giving too much of it to "unworthy people" could damage their own rights. Some of these so-called "John Paul II priests" are wonderful men, whose commitment to the faith is marvelous, but others strike me as terribly insecure, in search of a pedestal where they will not have to engage people, convinced that they have all the answers to life's conundrums and little patience for those who must first go off into the world and find their need for redemption there. I do not see much evidence in some of our hierarchy of that attitude of joyful welcome the father displays, still less of the contrition of the Prodigal himself for their own shortcomings.

As Peguy understood, and expressed so beautifully, the story is somewhat misnamed. It is not the parable of the Prodigal so much as it is the parable of the Father. It is his bestowal of freedom on his son that permits the story to unfold. It is the possibility of his mercy that creates the drama. It is his joy that brings us to tears. Whatever else the cardinals think of when they look around the room and decide who should sit in the Chair of Peter, I hope they will look for someone who communicates the father's joyful mercy. Our world has need of it. In this vale of tears, it is time for tears of joy.

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