

The Prodigal *Mother* ?

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year C

Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14
Psalms 51:3-4, 12-13, 17, 19

1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-32

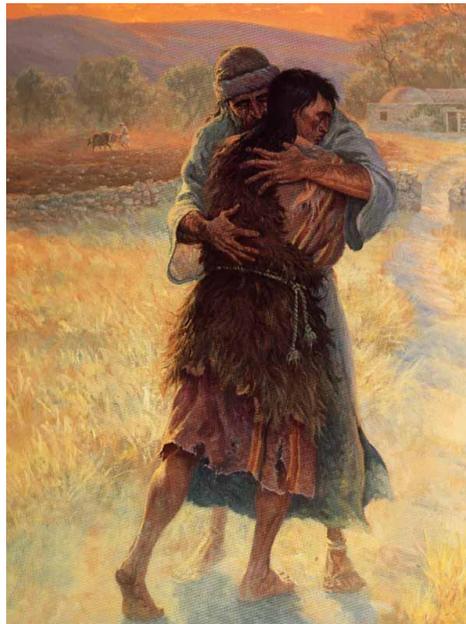
The Parable of the Prodigal Son is arguably one of the most beloved in Holy Scripture. The image of the loving father welcoming his lost son's return is one of the most moving moments of any story. Just as compelling is the cliffhanger ending to the story, which leaves the Father pleading with his other more faithful son to share and celebrate the joy at his brother's return.

One interpretation of this parable I am particularly fond of puts the title in the plural – *Prodigal Sons* – as each of the two sons is the focus of half of the parable; first, the son who left and then returned, followed by the son who stayed, but refused to celebrate the return of his wayward brother. The focus on the latter son as “prodigal” would be more in line with the direction of the parable, given that Jesus addressed this parable to the Pharisees who objected to Jesus’ welcome of and fellowship with sinners.

As a matter of personal opinion, one of the more inane interpretations is the idea that the story is somehow about a “Prodigal Father”. I myself have heard this from more than a few preachers over the years. As this

interpretation appears to have grown in popularity since the 1960s, a decade based heavily on the social questioning and systematic dismantling of the prominent authority, it makes sense that such a post-60s interpretation would look to question the integrity of the father figure, who is representative of the mercy and benevolence of God, Himself, who, despite our own human penchant for rationalization in the face of even a forgiving authority figure, is incapable of possessing qualities that can even remotely be considered “prodigal”, as the word is understood in the context of the parable.

All things being equal, however, especially in the mundane hyper-inclusivity of this day and age, I have never heard anyone attempt an interpretation that focusses on the rather conspicuously absent “Prodigal Mother”. Yet, if the loving father of the parable stands metaphorically for the loving, forgiving welcome of our heavenly Father toward those prodigal children who find their way back to Him, there is also to be acknowledged a mother who stands with Him, at His very side, awaiting the return of her lost, wayward children.



The Parable of the Prodigal Son

One of the growing ministries in many parishes is that which welcomes and assists Catholics who have fallen away from the Church, and who are looking to reconcile and return to the faith community. Priests, working in the parishes, are likewise no strangers to people who are looking to reconcile whatever estrangement they have felt from the Church, and to return to the celebration and reception of the sacraments, particularly the Holy Eucharist. Such outreach and ministry, whether through individual believers, formal parish programs, and even the Sacrament of Confession itself, are representative of the overall ministry of Holy Mother Church, who stands with, and in the name of Christ and His Heavenly Father, seeking those who are lost, while welcoming, even celebrating, when yet another prodigal child has returned home.

Just as in the parable there is the son who remained with the Father, who, though a faithful member of the household, nonetheless raised a strong objection to the merciful benevolence of his Father, so too, alas, does the Church have individuals, faithful to the ecclesiastical household, who likewise raise objections, cause divisions, and may even, themselves be the reason why

some of those estranged by the Church were initially alienated. Just as the loving Father interceded to bring about a renewed fraternity between the two brothers, so too does Holy Mother Church continually work for peace and reconciliation within her family.

The loving, benevolent Father, waited diligently for his son's return, and interceded with the other son to rejoice at his brother's home-coming. So too, does our Holy Mother await her lost children, rejoicing when one returns to the community of faith, making it, once again, their home. So too does our Holy Mother call on her faithful children to rejoice at the return of one of their brothers or sisters.

In short, the loving Mother is no more "prodigal" than is the benevolent Father. Together they stand, one with the other, Mother Church with our Heavenly Father, to welcome home their wayward children, and call on all of us to likewise rejoice at the return.

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