

“The Prodigal Son and the Unrepentant Son” by John Morris

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The 4th Sunday in Lent

My text is the parable of the prodigal son. I'm going to talk about the parable as a way to understand redemption, and maybe even Heaven.

I grew up with no religious education, because my parents didn't believe in it.

I'm not sure it's such a bad thing to raise a child without religion; I've heard, and seen, good arguments on both sides. But I most certainly regret learning nothing about the history and culture and heritage of Christianity. I never read the Bible, and it would not have occurred to me that there was anything in it worth reading. I read everything else voraciously, though, and so it was inevitable that I picked up a smattering of the great stories of the bible, the essential teachings of Jesus, and the professions of faith that came to form traditional Christian doctrine. But mostly, really, I knew nothing.

The prodigal son story first came to me in a song recorded by the Rolling Stones in 1968, when I was 14. I remember vividly everything about my early musical loves; listening to and playing music were the closest things to spiritual experiences I had. So, though it sounds unlikely, I can remember what I thought and felt when I first heard this song.

“Prodigal Son” is a pretty straightforward recounting of the biblical story, with each verse ending with some version of the refrain, “And that’ll be the way to get along.” I was moved and interested by this song. I did not know the story came from the bible. It sounded like a blues, a Southern tall tale, full of “poor boys” and “swine” and “famine comin’ in the land.” I especially loved the final verse:

Well the father said, “Eldest son,
Kill the fatted calf,
Call the family round,
Kill that calf and call the family round.
My son was lost and now he is found,
And that’s the way for us to get along.”

Such tenderness and simplicity of language, of imagery! My son was lost and now he is found. Who but a tough old bluesman, or Keith Richards, could have written it? Imagine my surprise, years later, when I discovered that it was written by a tough old guy named Luke, claiming to quote Jesus the Christ, and proclaiming him the Son of God.

As a lonely, unhappy 14-year-old, I could let myself feel my feelings, my longings, through the voice of a song like this. How badly I wanted a father who would love me that much! Even more, I yearned for a family to be “called round.” I was an only child, and for reasons too complex to fit into this sermon, my parents insisted on the unimportance, even the danger, of close connections to our extended family.

I know I’m not alone in those yearnings, and in the way that

the parable of the prodigal son speaks to them. I also know that the story is a parable of the Christian spiritual life for all of us as we walk our pilgrim path. I have been the prodigal son, more times than I can count, demanding my just rewards and striking out on my own, only to wind up sleeping with the pigs, and trying to find my way back home, certain that no parent could love the person I had become. I have been the father, hearing a call to keep loving, keep praying, keep believing, even when that love has been spurned. I know the feeling of irrational exuberance when you just plain love someone and are overjoyed to have them back, no matter what they've done, no matter what "justice" or "the rules" might have to say about it. And I have been the elder brother, infuriated that the rules of justice have been broken, demanding "fairness," wanting what's mine, even if it throws a cloud over everyone else's happiness.

All this, we all know. The story of the prodigal son is one of the great parables of Jesus, one of the great metaphors of the spirit. What more is there to say?

Let me return to my ignorant 14-year-old self. Even though I responded strongly to the story, I had some questions. I got the point, but couldn't help feeling there was a further point that had to be raised. Remember, I didn't know this was a "Christian" story, and yet my question was this: Would the father keep loving the prodigal son even if he never came home? Well, maybe so, but what good what that do the son? He was a hundred miles away, sleeping with the pigs. Does this story mean that you can expect a happy ending to all your wanderings and sorrow, provided you come home? I think I knew the word "repentance," and I'm pretty sure I understood that the story of the prodigal son is a parable of repentance. And part of me was uneasy with that.

As well I might be. I'm uneasy with it today. The growing pains of Christianity – not just now, but for hundreds of years – all have to do with how big a tent we can be, how all-

encompassing God's love can be. Who's in, who's out? Who gets saved? Who gets grace? Who will spend eternity with the Father in Heaven? I don't think any of these questions are silly, and I don't mean them ironically, though they have often been answered in silly or brutal ways. They are deeply important, to me, to us, and to the Christian message.

I did a quick Internet surf just to make sure, and yes, the parable of the prodigal son is still interpreted pretty widely as a redemption story. This, according to scholars, was how Jesus meant it, and it's hard to see how else to take it. For if the prodigal son had not hit bottom and returned home in humility, saying, "I have sinned against heaven and against you," asking not even to be a son again but merely to work his father's land, how then could the parable have ended? I'm a fiction writer, so indulge me as I try to sketch out that ending in a few sentences: "The younger son did not starve to death, but spent his life in misery and hardship, working with the pigs in foreign fields. He never returned home. His father kept watch for him every day, always prayed for his return, but his prayers were not granted. So he gave his love to his elder son, who rejoiced in his father's generosity and confidence, and they grew old together and died full of years."

What do you think? What would this parable say about God, and about the Christian life? I really want to know, because it seems to me that for every happy homecoming of a prodigal son, there are ten endings like this one: no one repents, no one is saved, prayers go unanswered, we settle for what we have. And let's go ahead and add what I'll call the traditional Christian conclusion: Those who do not repent and are not saved, will be cast into outer darkness, just as Jesus said, and will not spend eternity with God.

What do you think? Is that true? Are you able to rejoice in the return of the prodigal son, and yet ignore the exile of the . . . what shall we call him? The unrepentant son, of whom

there are untold millions. This sounds to me like a version of Christianity I do not know what to do with: Does it mean we are the Saved Club, and you have to pay your dues in order to join? Those who do not or will not . . . well, cue the wailing and the gnashing of teeth.

I wish I could tell you that, actually, Jesus and the gospel writers meant something different, but I don't believe they did. I believe Jesus and Luke are telling us that God's love is infinite and eternal – a love supreme, as we heard from John Coltrane – but something is required of us as well. It is freely given, but we must freely receive it. And to receive God's love demands repentance. Does not everything in the Gospels teach us this, from John the Baptist's first cry in the wilderness, to Jesus' insistence that we must undergo a new birth in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?

So it becomes my challenge as a believing Christian to find a way to accept this teaching. And in fact, if I can leave out all the damnation stuff, the wailing and the gnashing, I find that I do believe it. Everything in my own experience, for one thing, tells me that it's true. I have spent many a day as a self-proclaimed Christian, a member of this church, yet nonetheless isolated from God's love because I was unable to move toward him, beginning with repentance. Was this a limitation of God's love, some failing on her part? Even in my selfish rebellion, it didn't feel like that. It felt like me turning away.

Now I admit there's a part of me that wants God's love to be even bigger than that. To be so big that everyone, even the wicked and the unrepentant, get the same share of the father's inheritance. I suppose the secular equivalent of this state of affairs would resemble some sort of 1970s, Me-Decade, I'm OK You're OK philosophy. We're all great, as of right now! It makes no difference how you live your life, because there's nothing you can do that's actually wrong! Everything is holy, everything is blessed! Do your thing! I'd call this a

standard, and very tempting, Christian heresy, because it seems to take the idea of God's eternal and unfaltering love, and apply it across the board. But, when I consider the prodigal son parable, I don't find that this is the Christian understanding of how God loves. His love is indeed limitless, but the lover – you and me – we have to be in a certain place and condition in order to receive it.

Now I need to say this: Anyone who stands in a pulpit and has the nerve to talk about how God loves and whom she loves, had better declare some humility, and fast. So please, I'm just taking my best guesses here, and I hope I'm staying clear of what would be a terrible sin in itself: placing limits on what God can do through love.

All right. Here is another question I had, as a 14-year-old. While I didn't know the Rolling Stones song was one of Jesus' parables, I could certainly tell it was a metaphor, it was meant to say something about how life is. And in addition to wondering about the fate of that hypothetical unrepentant son, I also wondered, Exactly when is this joyous homecoming supposed to take place? Is it really on this earth? If "the way for us get along" is to call our family round, celebrate what was lost and is now found – does that mean that everything is wonderful from then on? What's the next chapter of the prodigal son story? For some reason, I had a lively sense of evil as a teenager, and knew very well that this kind of happy ending, with good people getting their rewards, was a fantasy. I had figured out that the world does not work that way. The family in the prodigal son story could reunite, celebrate – and then be raped and murdered by some warlord the very next day. Doesn't that change the lesson of the parable? It has to, doesn't it?

It took me many years, many of them trying to live as a Christian, before I could formulate my own tentative answer. And I find that it reaffirms another traditional Christian teaching: Not only does God's love require repentance, but the

final happy homecoming, the one that nothing can tarnish or alter – that must happen in the place where Christians for millennia have said it does: Heaven.

Now I have no more idea than you do (assuming you believe in Heaven, which I know many of you do not) what Heaven is like. All I know is that, for me, in order for the parable of the prodigal son to have a truly eternal meaning, there must be some better place where God's love really does reign. There has got to be a better ending to the story – to all our stories. And maybe that's when the lost ones, the ones who never know God in this life, will finally be found.

I know that many believers – many of them better Christians than I will ever be – see the promise of the Reign of Heaven as, after all, an earthly one. The better ending I long for, according to them, will take place right here, eventually, when we humans have accepted enough of God's love to be able to turn this earth into a paradise. I have two objections to this: The first, fairly trivially, is that even in a perfect earthly paradise, humans will die, and any happiness with them be over. But much more important, I cannot accept a paradise for whoever happens to be alive on earth at this wonderful time, while literally billions who came before them have wept and suffered, and died in agony.

No, it may be simple-minded or even childish of me, but I want the real deal: Eternal reunion with Christ, for ever and ever, amen! I want those who mourn to be comforted, I want those who hunger and thirst for righteousness to be filled, and I want the joy of God to go on forever. As for the weeping and the gnashing: Nope, still don't believe that and I hope I never will.

Christians throughout the ages have lived in hope of the resurrection. As we approach Easter, we may remember that, when Christ was dying on the cross, the consolation he offered to his fellow sufferer, the good thief, was "I tell you the

truth, today you will be with me in paradise." I am not ashamed to want this too. I want what Reinhold Niebuhr wanted when he prayed to God that "I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with You forever in the next." It is a profoundly selfish desire, but also profoundly Christian, because those of us who wish for this, wish it for everyone.

When I come home, I want to be home forever. Amen.