

The Surprise Was Mine

by: Robin Atwood Fidler



The Return of the Prodigal Son (1773) by Pompeo Batoni

My first encounter with the Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women was the Lenten series, *Surprised and Interpreted by the Gospel Parables*. I found myself definitely surprised by the complexity of the simple stories I thought I knew so well, stories that I had always taken as simple allegories with one interpretation. (Usually it was one that had been explained to me in a sermon somewhere along the way, one that I had then taken as ‘gospel’.)

Though we focused on a number of parables, the one that keeps coming back to me, and from which I gleaned something that I must have needed to learn at this point in my development, is the story of the prodigal son. As a child and young adult, hearing this parable, I remember always identifying with the older brother, and never really understanding the story. I felt a little resentful of the father, just as the older son did. After all, wasn't I the good girl, who always followed the rules (of which there were many in 1950's and '60's Catholicism)? Wasn't I a faithful member of the “one true church”? Was I supposed to believe that God would love and forgive someone who, like the younger son, ignored the teachings of the church, and was a sinner who only expressed repentance in order to save his own worthless hide?

In later years, I learned to analyze and interpret scripture readings, and to begin to see the richness of meaning in stories like the prodigal son. I came to see the word ‘prodigal’ as applying now to the father, whose love was so extravagant that he loved

both of his children, no matter what they did. Perhaps becoming a parent myself, and knowing the unconditional love I had for my own children, made it easier for me to understand the father and identify more with him than with the older son. I came to see God's love as extravagant, unending, and unconditional; freely given; not something I could earn by following the rules. That was consoling to the mature me, who knew that right and wrong were not as clear-cut as the childish me had believed. Besides, all of us are imperfect, no matter how much we might aspire to do the right thing. There is something of both of the sons in the story in all of us.

I came to the classes on the parables with this interpretation of the parable in the back of my mind, and was surprised that there was still so much I could learn from this story. Easter was coming, and I was busy preparing for the beautiful music our contemporary choir was going to sing for the glorious Easter vigil at our church. As a person who is involved in liturgy all year long, reading on Sundays, singing in the choir, there was more than a little of the older brother still in me. I knew that the church would be crowded on Easter, as it had been at Christmas, with people I didn't recognize because they seldom came to church outside of those holidays. Those of us who were there every week would joke about them, and there was resentment in our joking--resentment that one of these occasional church-goers might beat us to the closest parking space or our favorite pew. On a deeper level, if we were honest with ourselves, there was a little resentment that they would receive as much love and forgiveness as those of us who had been the good "older sons," who had always been there.

As I delved more deeply into the story of the prodigal son--a story that I thought I understood--a lesson came to me that I need to learn and re-learn all the time. It concerns welcoming my returning brothers and sisters. As the father urges his older son to rejoice with him, I need to rejoice in the presence of every person who is seeking to get closer to God, no matter how tentative or seemingly superficial those efforts may be. I can't hope ever to be

as extravagant in my love as the father in the story, but I can try harder to be more like him and less like the older brother. Surprised and interpreted by the parable, I recognize that in reality I'm much more like the character before whom we all like to feel superior, the younger brother.