

REMAKING THE FATHER IN OUR OWN IMAGE

“While he (the younger son) was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and was moved with compassion. He ran to his son embraced him and kissed him...bring out the finest robe, put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.” Jewish men in the first century did certain things and didn’t do certain things. One of the things they didn’t do was run. This father ran. And this father saw him while he was still far away. This father had been looking—for a long time. This father is a different kind of father.

I have always thought that it was just sheer joy that animated the father but recently came across some information about first century Judaism that brought a different light to bear on this story. For it seems that there was a ritual called *kezazah*, in Israel. It means “the cutting off.” It was invoked if a Jewish son had lost his inheritance among the Gentiles and then sought to return home to father’s house and village. When the community learned that this was happening they would assemble and perform a ceremony called the *kezazah*. They would break a large pot in front of the returning young man and yell, “Now you are cut off from your people!” The one who had lost the inheritance had shamed his own people and they did not want any of that shame to come upon them and so he was now *persona non grata*. He was totally rejected by the community.

So this father sees his son coming and runs to him and not only embraces him but clothes him in a fine robe with a ring and sandals. There will be no *kezazah* for this son. This father not only takes the son back but protects him from further damage. This father takes away his shame. Even though it is clear the son deserves something to happen to him because of the great irresponsibility he has shown. But the son has returned and even if his sorrow is not perfect and still has selfishness in it, this father is willing to overlook that. It is his son and he has returned. In effect, the father has challenged what the returning sons rehearsed words said, “I no longer deserve to be called your son.” “Of course, you are my son.” Of course, that relationship is not ended. Even though it is denied by his brother who refers to him as “that son of yours.”

I get the older son. To him it looks like the father is rewarding his brother for squandering the family’s assets. Why on earth should THAT be allowed? It is not something that the older son would ever even consider doing. They are so different in their mindsets. The older son is in danger of growing bitter. He has started to become resentful. Maybe it is the being with the father day in and day out and noticing that the father has not been the same since his brother grabbed the money and ran to life of luxurious living. Maybe this son has tried to distract his father or lighten his heart but to no avail. It is clear that the older son did not go after his brother to try to reason with him or talk him out of his plan. It is also pretty clear that there is no love lost between them. They are very unlike each other. And actually not too like their own father. The older son suffers from his own goodness, from his own being faithful and keeping the rules. He has been keeping score about all the good he is doing but his heart has grown heavy with spite and feelings of not being appreciated, of being taken for granted, of being overlooked and not being valued for his contribution to the family. Resentment. And the resentment against his brother has no outlet and so it stews inside his own heart and soul and begins to be a corrosive influence in his life. If unchecked it can actually turn to hatred.

We must not allow that to happen. When I feel resentment welling up within me I recognize it as a warning signal. Bells go off. It is a feeling or emotion that I know from past experience and I also know that it has the power to take me out. To take me away from living the kind of life that I really want to live. It can become more than a passing distraction. It can become, in me, a full time distraction, and it does not bring any good out in me. Rather destructive thoughts and tendencies appear. So when I feel resentment I know a couple of things. One, I am too busy, too overworked. I am not getting enough time for myself. I do not need a lot of time for myself but I do need some. And I must take that or I run the risk of resentment growing. Two, I need to get to confession. I go to confession about once a month but sometimes that can go longer. It is then I find myself at risk for resentment. When I am confessing my own sins regularly then what others do does not have the same impact on me as when I am delayed from confession or avoiding confession. I recommend it to you. When resentment shows itself take some time for yourself. Ask the Lord to help you to deal with the feelings right away and ask for the Lord's forgiveness.

Remember the story of the tax collector and the Pharisee? Jesus told that story too. Both were Jews. His own people. One was more righteous, at least in his own mind and the other was a sellout, similar to the two sons. The occasion for Jesus telling this story of the forgiving father with the two sons could easily transition from the other story. Both have a loving father but neither of the sons is really like their father. Thus the sadness in his heart. He had hopes for them. But they are not there. At least not yet.

Listen to this monologue of the father's inner musings written by Father John Shea:

*I have two sons, neither of whom want ME for their father. So they make me into the father they want.*

*One makes me into a pimp for his belly. He thinks he tricks me into concessions, cons a fatted calf from a sentimental old fool. He credits my dancing to his piping; but the music I hear has another source. He is always empty and so my fullness is hidden from him. His cunning gives him no rest so my peace cannot but elude him. He secretly seizes in the night what I freely offer in the day. He wants a father he can steal from. Instead he has me, a vine with more wine than he can drink. It is hard for him to forgive me for providing more than he can plunder. I am abundance. He must learn to live with it.*

*The other one counts my kisses. He wants me to count his. "For two days ploughing, take this hug. For a plentiful harvest, receive this blessing." He is so unsure of himself, he cannot share my assurance. He lives by MEASURING WHAT HE DOES NOT HAVE. An eye anywhere else is an eye lost to him. He thinks I take him for granted; but I lean on him like a staff. He is the privileged companion of my morning pain and evening praise. I would allow no one else to see the stumble of my memory, the embarrassment of my body. But he credits my love to his loyalty. He wants a father indentured to him, paying him back in affection for his back-breaking labor. Instead he has me, an ancient tree with its own soil. He does not understand that he cannot calm his panic with a bargain. There will be no chain between us. I freely tie my wrist to his.*

*I have two sons. Wherever they are, I go out to meet them. I am their father. But I am who I am. Let them be who they will be.*

*The Father is God. Will we allow God to be God, admitting our sin and accepting his forgiving love? That is Who the Father is. Who will we be?*