

Without A Trace - The Prodigal Son

March 18, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

There's a rather good television program on Sunday evenings, which is about missing persons. It's called ***Without A Trace*** and as I was going through the Lectionary for this Sunday I amused myself by wondering how they might have dealt with the Prodigal Son. It might have gone something like this.

After the first few weeks, local law enforcement began to focus on other more pressing matters. A young man vanishes after getting hold of a lump sum of money and leaves without a trace. This does not necessarily signify foul play; but the family had insisted that the police list him among ***missing persons*** anyway. Their sleepless nights and endless hours of worry over their son moved them to do whatever they could to find the boy. But the alert had, with time, moved from red to orange to green to cold gray for the Judean constabulary.

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Why had he done it? Why had the father given in to this fantastic request from his second son in the first place? Didn't he realize that adolescent rebellion mixed with a bulging bank balance and high limit debt cards spelled impending doom? It was a question that haunted him every hour of every day. It was a question that his older son and his distraught wife would mull over through their cold silence over dinner. It was a question that not even Tylenol PM could overcome when the darkness set in during the wee hours of the night. In his sleeplessness, the father went to the Internet night after night. But, no luck. *No son*. Why on earth had he *done* such a thing?

We are not told where the boy went with his newly acquired wealth, but, as it turned out, he was not abducted by a kidnapper, but by his own appetites. The Scripture just calls it *dissolute living*, which his older brother fantasizes to be devouring *his* property with prostitutes (Lk. 15:30). Whatever. The

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imagination leaps and crackles like a hot fire at the prospect of going into a *far country* where no one knows you, no one is watching you with a parental superego, and you have a bankroll in your pocket.

St. Paul says that the “wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23), but fortunately, this young man gets stopped while he is still on the respirator. The money runs out. The high living turns low, *really low*. With no Salvation Army to take him in, this Jewish boy sinks lower and lower and he takes a menial job as a swineherd on a Gentile hog farm. Not good.

Although it isn't guaranteed by any means, suffering can be a great teacher. The boy realized that his misery might be optional. *He came to himself* (v.17) and figured that even the hired hands at the ranch back in Israel would get three square meals a day; and with the right confession to his dad, he might win the old man back enough to get to be a day laborer. So, he

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rehearses the speech of his life while hitch-hiking his way home: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants* (vv. 18-19).

To his astonishment, when the squandering, improvident prodigal walks hump-shouldered past the swimming pool and up the last leg of the driveway, he does a double-take. He sees his father on the porch scanning the horizon with his binoculars. The boy sees him leap to his feet and race toward him. The boy prays that he will get his speech right.

Just what you would not expect happens. The boy is swept off his feet, covered in a bear hug of whiskers and tears and primordial shouts of disbelief and joy by his father. Still convinced he must atone for his reckless insensitivity, the boy falls to his knees and begins to confess something on the order of, "I am *not*

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worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table (BCP 1979, p. 337). But the confession flies over his father's head. He doesn't even hear it. ***Bring quickly*** the father said to his servants, ***the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found*** (22-24).

The older brother was not happy about his brother's return. His poor-pitiful-me whining about being obedient and dutiful, yet unrewarded in anything like the manner the prodigal was, speaks volumes about a tired, bitter religion and how the Gospel of Jesus exposes it. The prodigal found out what the older brother has yet to learn: ***God owes us nothing***. Good, dutiful behavior does not put God in our debt. To the contrary, ***righteousness*** before God is a gift of love,

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not a reward for good works. And only the lost, it seems, can find this pearl of great price.

The party in this parable, if you look at it, is unmistakably the Messianic banquet, that is, the banquet of reconciliation. It is a celebration filled with unworthy people, people who once were dead, but now are alive; people who lived in the far country, but now have come home; people who wandered the wilderness, but now have been brought to the promised land.

The parable brings *us* to the threshold of that party. We stand at the threshold of the Promised Land just like the elder brother. We don't know what the elder brother did. We don't know if the father was ever able to say of him, *This my son was dead to life, dead to joy, dead to forgiveness and reconciliation, but now he is alive.* We don't know if the elder brother ever went inside and joined the party. We, however, can

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pose the even more important question, *What will we do? Will we ever unfold our arms, let any bitterness we may have go, and join the party? Will we participate in the ministry of reconciliation by joining the banquet? Will it finally be said of us “these my people were dead, but now they are alive?”*

AMEN.