

The Prodigal Daughter, Revised 2013

About ten years ago, I attended a Lenten penance service with multiple parishes from the northwest area of the diocese in attendance. The theme was “The Prodigal Son,” our gospel for this week. The story of The Prodigal Son is one of the most comforting stories in all of scripture. What father, when his son asked for bread, would give him a stone? What kind and loving father would set his son’s teeth on edge? What father, when his son asked for his inheritance, would not give his son what he thought the son was entitled to have? What father would leave his son alone to suffer when the son needed help? What father would not anxiously search the road, waiting for the return of his beloved son in whom he was well pleased, despite the fact that the son had sinned against both God and the father parent? Such a blessing it is to have such a kind and loving father whose abundant blessings are so lavishly bestowed upon a favored son!

As I sat in a congregation that consisted largely of women, I looked around at the cadre of male priests standing in their robes upon the altar. As the male presider read the story of “The Prodigal Son,” the thought suddenly popped into my mind, “What about the Prodigal Daughter?” What would have happened to a girl/woman who left home to follow her dreams and then returned to throw herself on the mercy of the father? If she confessed her sins to the priest who represented a male define socio-political world? Would the blessings of the fathers drop pressed down and overflowing into her lap? Would she get a ring and a robe and a welcome home barbecue dinner? Somehow, I doubted it. So I decided to write the story of “The Prodigal Daughter.”

A certain man had two daughters. This man was a righteous man, well versed in the law, had brought up his two daughters according to the law. The oldest daughter, Maryam, was a spunky, intelligent, lively girl who did not particularly relish getting married and having child after child, most of whom would die. She didn’t particularly like hearing her father and all of the men of the village praying, “I thank thee, O lord my God that I was not born a woman.” She was not enamored of being a servant for all of her life. When she expressed

her feelings to her parents, they told her she was possessed by a devil. God made the world the way it was, with men in charge. It had been like this from the beginning, so there was no way out. Maryam ran away, hoping to find a better place.

History is filled with stories of girls who dress as boys and go into the world to seek their fortunes. Suppose Maryam has a young male friend who gave her male clothing and headgear. Perhaps they even run off together, two young rebels off to see the world. In a very short time, Maryam would learn that the world did, indeed, belong to men. As she traveled from village to village, she saw that all of the villages and all of the families in all her land were the same. Her father was right. It was senseless to fight against what seemed to be ordained by God. She was, indeed, a silly, empty-headed girl.

Hungry, tired, and dirty, Maryam began to think of her warm little house and her mother's hearth cakes cooking upon the fire. She even thought of her father. Surely, if she returned home, acknowledged her sin, and promised to be the good little girl he always wanted her to be, he would welcome her back and allow her to resume her place in the household, even if she must sit among the cinders in the fireplace.

All the way home, Maryam practiced her speech. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and you. I am no longer worthy to be called your child. Please allow me to come home and I will never trouble you again with childish fantasies."

So Maryam made her way home alone, weariness and hunger written upon her face. Her father was sitting outside their little house when she approached. "Father," she said running towards him, "I have sinned against heaven and you. Please forgive me!"

The look upon her father's face stopped Maryam dead in her tracks. She remembered the verse from scripture about people having a heart of stone. Only a man with such a heart could look at her the way her father was looking at her. Grabbing her by her robe, he dragged her along the village street and threw her headlong on the ground at the feet of the elders.

“You are right,” he said, “You have sinned against heaven and against me. Who will ever marry you now? You are damaged goods. You have dishonored my good name and are no longer worthy to be called my daughter. Your name has been erased from my house. It is as if you have never been born. Be gone, and never return. You are dead to me.”

Maryam looked around at all of the faces she had known since childhood; her father, her mother, her sister, her neighbors, the elders, her friends. Their faces were set like flint. There would be no mercy. No loving kindness. She was a curse and a malediction among her own people, forced to bear iniquity that few men would ever bear.

Maryam was taken to the gates of the village and ordered to leave. Like thousands of Maryams before her and the thousands of Maryams who would come after her, our Maryam was forced to do what countless of other abandoned women have done throughout the ages in order to eat.

Let us suppose, however, that this particular Maryam was blessed with a stroke of good luck that women like her rarely encounter. Let us say that Maryam was strong and smart and somehow made her way to Jerusalem. Perhaps some older men exchanged protection for the use of her young body. However, luck rarely lasts for women who live on the margins. Someone found out about Maryam and reported her to the priests and elders in Jerusalem.

Maryam was forced to relive the nightmarish experience of being dragged down the street through a gauntlet of jeering men, this time by her hair. Again, she was cast into the dirt of the street. She lay upon the stony ground, staring away from the crowd of men with rocks in their hands, and up into God’s bright blue sky. “Please, God, just let it be quick,” she prayed as the first rock hit her in the jaw. As more rocks hit her, Maryam rolled up into a ball with her head between her knees and thought about verses from Isaiah. In spite of her sins, which she knew were as numerous as the Roman legions who stood by her murderers with blank faces, Maryam believed deep within, she was a woman of

suffering acquainted with grief; one of the many women of the world who were despised and held to be of no account.

“What perversion of justice demands her death? Why must her death be an offering for the sins of others?” Was she thinking these words in her delirium? The stoning had suddenly stopped. Lifting her bloodied face from between her knees, Maryam saw a man standing right in front of the long line of her condemners. He seemed like all of the other men in Judea, short and squat with dark hair and eyes.

Maryam’s eyes had fixated upon his hands that he had lifted up to heaven as he spoke. She saw that they were rough, calloused, common hands. The tips of two of his fingers were missing. How could a mere laborer question the authority of the priests and elders? Maryam had gotten up onto her hands and knees and lifted up her head, blood dripping from the wound on her jaw.

The man had knelt down beside her in the dirt and began writing something. When he finished, the priests read the man’s words in silence and dropped their rocks. Then the common laborer announced to the assembly of powerful men, “Let anyone among you who is without sin throw the first stone at her.”

Maryam lifted up her eyes to her savior who looked at her with mercy and loving kindness. Never had any man protected her. Always men wanted something from her; food, service, obedience, her body. Then, the man wrote some more, and all of the men left, one by one. Maryam crawled over to him and kissed his feet. The man took her hands in his and lifted her to her feet. He touched the wound on her jaw and the bleeding stopped. Kissing her hands, the man said, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? Maryam replied in amazement, “No one, sir.” And the man said, “Neither do I.”

The Gospel of John says that Jesus told Maryam to go her way and sin no more. However, going that way alone, penniless, and without male protection would only lead to more “sin,” more cursing, more stonings. Jesus, for that, Maryam learned was his name, knew the plight of women pushed by structural sin to the rough edges of society. Hadn’t he heard his mother’s sad comment as she fed the women who lived in the

shadows of Nazareth, “There but for the grace of God go I!” Jesus had observed the hardness of heart of so many human beings. That is why he condemned divorce. He didn’t like the fact that women were bought and sold like cattle and then put out to pasture. He didn’t think that the world revolved around the subjugation of women. That’s why he accepted women like Maryam as equals into his little band of disciples. From his mother, he had learned that the grace of God falls in equal measure upon all of God’s creatures.

A postscript to the story of the woman caught in adultery might read, You, my daughter are a new creation. Come with me and I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden, light. I now call you friend. There is only one rule you must follow. You must love your neighbor, even the men who harmed you, as I have loved you.”

So Maryam stood up to her full height and looked at the man who had saved the life of the least member of the people of Israel, a whore. And Maryam said, “Yes, my lord, I will follow you, even unto the death.”

Under the protection of Jesus, Maryam joined a band of sisters and brothers where all were one body in his holy name. And Maryam, the strong, lively, spunky Maryam joined the ranks of the many Maryams who followed Jesus to his death.

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