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## The Return of the Prodigal Father

JAMES M. CHESBRO

The two Jesuit priests in campus ministry at the high school where I teach, asked me to give a talk at the father-son retreat. I watched my kindergartner buckle himself into his car seat the following morning and wondered what I might say to fathers whose sons drive. When I began teaching I was closer in age to the students compared to their parents. But now, as I'm closer to age forty than I am to thirty, I certainly have an appreciation for what it must be like to parent a son who strides in and out of the house with his own set of car keys.

The morning of the retreat, the fathers and sons sat in a circle, taking turns introducing each other. The ceiling fans played with the air from the opened windows of the small chapel. As the first father spoke he shifted in his seat to lift his foot from the burgundy rug to rest it on his leg. Beyond the stained glass windows, cars hummed past us intermittently on that Saturday morning. I listened to them take turns saying something they admired about the other. I looked at the men and young men looking at each other and thought about their resemblance to one another and the quote I had just finished reading in the retreat program from Henri Nouwen's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*:

Recently, on looking into a mirror, I was struck by how much I look like my dad. Looking at my own features, I suddenly saw the man whom I had seen when I was twenty-seven years old: the man I had admired as well as criticized, loved as well as feared. Much of my energy had been invested in finding my own self in the face of this person, and many of my questions about who I was and who I was to become had been shaped by being the son of this man. As I suddenly saw this man appearing in the mirror, I was overcome with the awareness that all the differences I had been aware of during my lifetime seemed so small compared with the similarities. And with a shock, I realized that I was indeed heir, successor, the one who is admired, feared, praised, and misunderstood by others, as my dad was by me.<sup>1</sup>

One boy's reaction to his father's introduction of him remains in my mind. He peered into his lap, sitting on his hands. This is my son, the father said. He's under a lot of pressure since he's in his junior year. I'm proud of how hard

he works at subjects that don't come easy to him. He doesn't ever give up. He stays at it. Of course, when we talk about school we focus on the results, the grades. I don't say it a lot, but I admire how he never quits. I admire his effort.

The son didn't raise his head until his father finished. The boy's fair-skinned face glowed like the head of a struck match, the air moving over his head in the sunrays. Well, I mean, my dad works really hard, the boy said. I mean, I like my friends here, and I wouldn't be able to go here if he didn't work so hard, the boy said. How rare it is that fathers and sons praise one another in private, let alone in front of others.

A large print of Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, to which Nouwen titles his book after, rested on one of the chairs in the circle. I liked sitting in the fellowship of these other men, the men, who like me are "admired, feared, praised, and misunderstood by" their children.

Months ago, I had spent the entire day sequestered in my bedroom, listening to the voices of my wife and three children, while recovering from a stomach bug. James was age five, and our daughters were two and a half, and fifteen months. The following morning, I opened Mary's door, plucked her from her crib, and let her wrap her arms around my neck, whispering "Daddy," as she exhaled a sigh of relief. Our youngest, Clare, was already up, and toddled on her feet toward me in the hall. She squealed my name, and hugged my leg.

At the bottom of the stairs, I put the girls down, and saw James. I intended to rub his head—ask him how his day was in kindergarten. It was his turn to be a class leader. Instead of telling me anything, he punched me in the gut. I had yet to rub the sleep from my eyes, and I didn't see the expression on his face, or his fist pulling back again. He caught me with his second jab in the ribs. The shots seemed innocuous enough for my wife to laugh, but the tight-fisted strikes hit me as more than playful roughhousing. When I followed him and asked why he punched me, he ran away and went back to his seat in the den—staring at the cartoon playing on the screen.

Before we left the house for the day, we made our way toward one another. We circled each other on the living room rug, a place where we often wrestle. I dropped to a knee, and he tackled me with all his might. I rolled on my back and he slammed his hand to the floor to signal the pin. As I thought about the punches my son threw that morning, I wondered if they were his way of telling me he was mad about my daylong absence, that it made him feel uneasy.

Though my daughters are toddlers, I can already see a difference in how they express themselves from their brother. Mary and Clare will cry if I hurt their feelings or misinterpret what they want. They will cry and shortly thereafter, they will tell me what they want. My son cries too of course, but the hurt feelings that smolder under his ribs linger longer, until they drip from his eyes



*Father & Son*, Courtesy Joe Regan

and the hot tears streak his face. What I know of the father's role stems first from being my father's son, and I don't want James to feel as disconnected to me as I felt toward my father when I was a boy.

But this is the way of fathers and sons though, isn't it—that even though we may have the best intentions, the most strident devotion for one another, like many great stories, our relationships are a series of connections and disconnections—of separations and homecomings, departures and returns.

I certainly have stared at the dark ceiling beating myself up for yelling at my children. My thoughts shift, however, when I ask God to forgive me, and I realize that maybe it isn't God that I need to ask to forgive me. Instead of continuing the self-interrogation I think about how I might interact with the kids tomorrow. And yet, how is it that these little rascals know our triggers so well? For example, on occasion, when James's school has a half-day he comes to the high school where I teach while classes are in session. Apparently, he finds it terribly amusing that students address me as "Mr. Chesbro," because often when I ask him to stay in his seat during dinner, or to pick up the small bits of crayon that fall to the floor and are a choking hazard to his fifteen month old little sister, who mouths everything, he says, "Okay, Mr. Chez-ba-ro."

At age five, the kid already knows how to bust my chops. The mask I put on when teaching American literature to seventeen-year-old boys is a rather buttoned-up version of myself. At times I'll slip out of this formal mode to regain the class's attention, like when reading a passage from *The Great Gatsby*, and my sense is that the students have their heads out the windows. I'll exchange a character's name for Kim Kardashian in the middle of a sentence to see if they are awake. If I'm really desperate, I might even ask them what they think Kim Kardashian would have to say if she were asked her thoughts on the nature of Tom and Daisy Buchanan's marriage, or if she thought Jay Gatsby was indeed great, or if she has ever read a book.

My teaching persona is most often serious, and I hate the idea that when I'm sipping coffee in my pajamas on a Saturday morning my five-year-old calls me "Mr. Chez-ba-ro" because it makes me think he's calling me a tight-ass. I don't want my son to think of me as a tight-ass, because, in my youth that is how I looked at my father, who also taught high school students.

As a boy, living a few miles from Philadelphia, when we crossed the Delaware River, I wanted my father to take me to Veterans Stadium, to go see the Eagles or Phillies play. Instead he brought me to the Philadelphia Art Museum for introductory lessons in how to tell your dad that his idea of fun, of climbing endless marble white steps to stare at huge paintings with exploratory eyes was as enjoyable as tolerating piano lessons from our next-door-neighbor, Mrs. Melhorn.

When I lived in another state and turned twenty-four my father and I became friends. We were both single men who taught teenagers. We talked more than we ever had before. I was even moved to write him an apology letter for roaring at him during my parent's divorce, and the long silences between us after I slammed the door on him, after the broken pieces of old plaster settled in the fragile walls that separated us. He died one month after receiving the letter. When I removed his belongings from the house he rented, I found the letter in its opened envelope, next to his tube-socks in the top drawer of his dresser.

Perhaps one of the reasons “The Parable of the Lost Son” is so inclusive is the number of entry points that exist for the reader. Most sermons I've heard on this parable tend to focus on the sons, particularly the youngest, the one who asked for and received his share of his father's estate and “left for a distant country where he squandered his money on a life of debauchery” (Lk 15: 11–32).<sup>2</sup> Maybe like him, we seek forgiveness. We want to repent and return, feeling at a great distance to one of our parents. Or, other times, perhaps we find ourselves relating more to the obedient older son, who “retorted” his father's request to join the celebration, and said, “All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property—he and his loose women—you kill the calf we had been fattening.” Maybe that pinch of jealousy resonates when thinking about the freedom the younger brother had to adventure beyond the confines of his father's land. We can't skip over the brothers. All sons are heirs and successors to the way they are fathered, and becoming a father doesn't replace one's sonhood, but I want to focus on the father.

Upon returning, when “he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity.” This suggests that the father was moved *from* a certain state or condition other than pity. Think about it. Isn't it possible that the father was sorry too? Consider all the interactions he might have replayed in his mind while his lost son was away. Did the father wonder if his love was overbearing? Maybe the father's success seemed so large that the son feared he'd never be able to step free from his father's shadow unless he left. If one source of anger is pain, than imagine the fury that raged in the father. Because before the “father saw him,” before the father proclaims to the elder brother that the younger brother “was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found” he was simply a “lost” son—one who was “dead.” I keep thinking about this interior movement, because I want to learn everything this moment has to teach me. The father “was moved” away from an emotional state other than pity, which compelled him to physically act, when “He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him.”

I wonder if we shouldn't think of the father as a prodigal figure as well. After all, it's the father who returns to the threshold of his vocation. The purest state of unconditional love that I have experienced for anyone were in the moments I first heard my newborn children cry, and I felt the weight of them in my arms and heard the air entering and leaving the gap between their lips. This is a father's inauguration not just into his love for his child, but into an extreme awareness of their vulnerability, of how much they will always need him. Without the prodigal father's ability to return to this purest state of fatherhood, which is what gives him the freedom to open his arms, there is no story, no reconnection. Both men experience internal movements that propel their outward actions. When the lost son returns, the father returns as well.

The penultimate activity for the fathers and sons before returning to the small chapel for a group discussion, was to walk the campus together and share a story that the other didn't already know. When they returned, they rested in the chairs and continued to speak to one another. Father Paul, one of the two retreat leaders, raised his hands to begin the discussion, asking if anyone would want to volunteer to go first. It didn't take long for one father to lift his arm. This was such a great day, he said. We never really get a chance to talk to one another. When I'm driving him places we catch up, but not like this. I think the big takeaway for us is just to try to make this happen more, otherwise it won't. We're both so busy.

Yeah, I agree, another dad said. I drive my son to his bus stop. He hops on, the bus drives off and that's it. I've only been to the school a few times, so his whole day is a mystery to me. He showed me around, where his classes are, his locker and everything, and now I can picture where he is. I feel like I have an idea of where he goes off to each morning rather than him disappearing into some mirage.

I imagined this man sitting in his car watching his son board the bus and become part of the moving heads and arms in the windows. And soon, of course, the exhaust plumes, the heads bounce and bodies sway with that first jerk of the bus as it begins to lurch forward, the sediment and dirt clouding the air, the father squinting in the glare, before turning to drive the other way.

James likes to jump on me when I'm on the couch, or in the Laz-E-Boy, but I've trained him to at least warn me by calling out, "Incoming." Maybe it's my father's death, or teaching high school boys, or the combination, but I'm hyperaware of the temporary nature of my son's five-year-oldness. So, I encourage the interaction, the contact. Anyway, often when we are playing together he punches me out of affection, usually after he tells a joke and we're both laughing.

"What was that for?" I say.

"What?" James says. "That's guy stuff, dad."

When James is really mad though, when he's in trouble, he says the things that children say while having a tantrum, and with words he swings with all his might. More times than I'd like to admit, I yell and point to his room. What I wish I did more often is take a knee so I'm not towering over him. Or, put my hands in my pockets and let him finish.

Upon returning from his room or sitting on the step, he likes to act as if nothing happened. I'll go with it, usually. He doesn't always need a lecture. But unfortunately, if he's really worked up in those instances, as I hear him stomping upstairs, I can be found downstairs repeatedly exhaling with the foul breath of regret. In those cases, when he returns, I don't laugh at the joke he tells. I tell him I'm sorry for yelling. I tell him I'm sorry for losing my patience—I shouldn't have acted that way. After the prodigal father saw his son, and after "he was moved with pity," he did not stand on high with his arms crossed and his righteous chin pointed toward heaven. He "ran to the boy." And so at this early age, naturally I'm not concerned that he acts out. Fatherhood is not about teaching kids to be perfect, or maintaining continuous harmony with your children. Of course they will mess up, and so will we. Like the father in the parable who "clasped" his son "in his arms and kissed him," before his son spoke an apologetic word, I want to be a father who can take a punch. I want my son and me to know the pathways back to one another. No matter his decisions, at any age, I want my boy to know his father will always allow himself to be moved by the sight of his son.

## NOTES

1. Henri J.M.Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 123–4.
2. All Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.