

## Embittered Moralizing



One of the dangers inherent in trying to live out a life of Christian fidelity is that we are prone to become embittered moralizers, older brothers of the prodigal son, angry and jealous at God's over-generous mercy, bitter because persons who wander and stray can so easily access the heavenly banquet table.

But this isn't unique to faithful church-goers. It's part of the universal struggle to age without bitterness and anger. We spend the first-half of our lives wrestling with the sixth commandment and spend the last-half of our lives wrestling with the fifth commandment: Thou shalt not kill! Long before anyone is shot by a gun, he is shot by a word, and before he is shot by a word, he is shot by a thought. We all think murderous thoughts: Who does he think he is? And it becomes harder and harder not to think them as we age.

Aging without bitterness and anger is in fact our final struggle, psychologically and spiritually. The great Swiss psychologist, Alice Miller, suggests that the primary task of the second-half of life is that of mourning, mourning our wounds so as not to become bitter and angry. We have to mourn, she says, until our very foundations shake otherwise our ungrieved wounds will forever leave us prone to bitterness, anger, and cold judgments.

At the end of the day there is only one remaining spiritual imperative: We are not meant to die in anger and bitterness. And so, as we age, we can progressively slim our spiritual vocabulary down to one word: Forgive, forgive, forgive. Only forgiveness can save us from bitterness and anger.

Indeed, there are few Gospel texts as sobering as the Gospel story of the Prodigal Son. As good commentaries on this text are quick to point out, the central character of this story is not the prodigal son, but the father, and the central message of the text is his over-generous mercy. He is a father who is trying to get his two sons into his house (his house being an image for heaven). But the younger son is, for a long time, out of the house through weakness, while the older son is just as effectively outside the

house through a bitterness and an anger that have soured his fidelity. Unlike the father who is grateful and joyous because his wayward son has come home, the older brother is angry and bitter that the father has not withheld his mercy and that his errant brother was not first punished and made to meet certain conditions before he was welcomed back home.

Now there's an older brother of this sort in all of us. We see it, for instance, in the fierce resistance many, wonderfully faithful, church-going, Christians express apposite certain people receiving communion at the Eucharist. Granted, there are legitimate ecclesial issues here, to do with public forum and scandal, which need to be sorted out, as the recent Synod on family life tried to do. But that synod also highlighted the resistance that many feel towards persons that they deem unworthy to receive communion at the Eucharist.

Independent of the ecclesial issues coloring this, those of us who struggle with certain others going to communion should still ask ourselves: Why is this bothering me? Why am I angry about someone else going to communion? What's really the basis for my resistance? What might this be saying about me? Is my heart wide and mellow enough right now to go to heaven, to sit down at the banquet table with everyone?

Do I have the courage and humility to ask myself this question: Am I not akin to the older brother standing outside the house, bitter that someone who seems undeserving is receiving the Father's love and blessing?

But we need to ask ourselves that with sympathy. We aren't bad persons; it's just that a certain bitter moralizing is an occupational hazard for us. Still we need to ask ourselves these hard questions, for our own sake, lest, blind to ourselves, we become the older brother of the prodigal son.

Paradoxical, ironic, strange, but we can be faithful, upright-morally, duty-bound, church-going Christians, preaching the gospel to others and, at the same time, carry inside of ourselves an anger, a bitterness, and an unconscious envy of the amoral which has us standing outside the house of celebration, blocked from entry because we are angry at how wide and indiscriminating is our own God's embrace.

But that weakness and bi-polarity have already been taken into account. The story of the Prodigal Son ends, not with the father's joy at the return of his sinful son, but with the father at the door of the house, gently pleading with his older son to give up his bitterness and enter the dance. We don't know how that story ends, but, given God's jealous love and infinite patience, there's little reason to doubt that eventually the older brother entered the house and sat down at table with his prodigal brother.

Ron Rolheiser, OMI