

Convention Sermon

The Challenge Of This Hour

By John R. Claypool

For most of us, the process of growing up is an exceedingly difficult and demanding pilgrimage. There are so many pitfalls in the movement out of infancy into childhood and then out of childhood into adolescence and then out of adolescence into adulthood. In fact, one could say that the going gets rougher the further you move along this path. The thresholds of challenge seem to rise higher and higher with each successive stage, and by all odds the most difficult passage of all to navigate is the one from adolescence into mature adulthood. Because of this difficulty, we need all the help we can possibly get, and this is why the parable of the prodigal son has come to mean so much to me. What we have here is a classic portrait of a young man at precisely this point in his developmental struggle. With mastery of insight, Jesus lets us "live in" to such a crisis and see from the inside what is involved in negotiating those turbulent rapids that separate adolescence and adulthood. And He did not tell this story just to entertain. He gave it to us for our understanding and appropriation. We would do well, then, to consider with great care this portrait of one man's growing up.

It is quite obvious at the beginning of the parable that the younger son had little idea of who he was or what kind of world surrounded him. The whole world around him was big and alive and full of beckoning promise, but his vision of it all was blurred and as yet

indistinct. However, one thing was certain—this young man wanted to find things out for himself, and the first step toward this goal was to get away. He had to individuate, to discover where his family left off and his personhood began, and so he walked in one day and demanded his inheritance and his freedom and proceeded to separate himself from those human sources that had given him his life and sustained him.

Perhaps we should pause here a moment and ask just why the prodigal was moved to leave as he did. I do not think for a moment that any one thing is an adequate explanation here. It was a combination of many complex factors that powered him "out of the nest," all of them rooted in the unfocussedness that is characteristic of this stage in life.

For example, I am sure there was an element of idealism here, that age-old desire to go out and conquer the world and cover one's self in fame and glory. There was also probably some arrogance here, a sense in which "the squares" at home were rejected for a way of life he was sure he could create that would be infinitely more exciting. There also must have been a large dose of naive insensitivity, simply not realizing what he was doing to the feelings or the fortunes of the people about him. In asking for his share of the inheritance at that moment, he was saying in effect to his father: "I wish you were dead and this were your funeral day and the estate were being

divided." He also was pulling a third of the capital out of the family enterprise and thus reducing its effectiveness. However, my guess is that the prodigal was not even aware of these waves that he was making. As is typical of adolescence, he was so preoccupied with himself and his simplistic visions of grandeur that he bulled on through without even noticing how his actions were affecting those around him.

It was a combination, then, of many factors that propelled him to move away from home, and he lost no time going to a place designated simply as "the far country." And there he collided head-on with the realities of a world about which he knew very little. Paul Tillich used to define reality as that which one "comes up against," that stubborn otherness of things that exist outside our wishing or creating. Reality is what I have to adjust to because I find it will not adjust to me. If I try to walk into a wall five times and each time am refused passage, the call of reality is to adjust to that fact and start looking for a door. Well, coming up against certain things he had not created is exactly what the prodigal did in the far country, and before he knew it his whole inheritance was gone, and instead of having beaten the System, the System had beaten him. To use a word that was popular in theological circles a few years ago, the prodigal's collision with reality "demythologized" him; that is, it stripped him bare of those romantic illusions he had had of himself, and unmasked the truth for him and all the world to see. There, in the humiliation of a pigsty, this Jewish lad is described as "coming to himself"; that is, beginning to see the shape of his being in sharper and sharper focus. In such a process, the whole world of images out of which he had lived up to then were called into question. His youthful idealism—the idea that he had no limits and could do anything—had been shattered. He also saw the fallacy of the arrogance that had rejected home so totally and been so sure he could create something





better. The life style that he had been so anxious to leave looked very different to him from the perspective of the pigpen, as he remembered home and the family and the hired servants and how they all lived in plenty. Then, too, his monumental insensitivity was painfully brought home to him. What he had done to his father, yea to God and all of life, was now no longer blurred, but there before him clear and distinct.

In a word, the prodigal suddenly found himself stripped of the fantasies of childhood and face to face with realities of his being, and that is always a surpassingly crucial moment in the pilgrimage of any self. When you realize you are not perfect but have real limits and weaknesses, this is a terrifying discovery, and much depends on how you respond to such a crisis. The prodigal did what most people do; having finally glimpsed his real condition, he went into a real depression and made haste to try to give himself away, to turn his personhood over to some external authority. He decided to go back and try to get on as one of his father's hired servants. In effect, he wanted to do "an about-face" on the tract of his developmental pilgrimage, and move back to the dependence of childhood rather than forward to responsible adulthood. Having discovered he was not everything, he concluded he was not anything and beat a hasty retreat.

But in this effort the prodigal was fortunate beyond measure, because he had a father who knew what maturity was: all about and also knew how to facilitate its emergence. Remember now, this was the father who had been wise enough to let the prodigal go in the height of his rebellion. All through his life, I am sure, this father had tried to teach his son from without, but he was sensitive enough to recognize the moment when the boy was no longer willing to learn that way. Now he must experience for himself — most probably through suffering — what he refused to be taught by another. And in that moment the father resisted the

temptation to be overly-protective, and turned the boy over to that great teacher called Life. It was there he learned what he refused to be taught; namely, that he was limited and imperfect and not a superman. Yet, as he came limping home that day, the father realized in a flash that he had learned this lesson, and with great skill proceeded to finish the delicate process by which the prodigal would come to his true self. You are familiar with how he ran to meet him and embraced him, and heard him blurt out the words of confession and plead with his father to allow him to become a little child again and live as a simple hired servant. But the father would hear nothing of such a suggestion! In effect, by calling for the robe and the ring and the shoes, he took the prodigal by the shoulders and turned him completely around, and faced him again toward adulthood rather than childhood. All this paraphernalia that the father called for were actually symbols of sonship and partnership in the family enterprise. The father was thus saying: "You must not go back to the helplessness of childhood. You were not born to be a slave; you were born to be free, a son of the manor house, meant to be a collaborator with me and a responsible partner in the destiny of this family. I challenge you to take what you have learned in the far country and what I am telling you now and grow up. Put away the simplistic notions of childhood, whatever they may be, and become a man, my son!"

Right here is the crucial "rite of passage" between adolescence and maturity, and it consists of two things: one, coming to terms with one's limits, with the outward perimeter of one's real being; and then, within those limits, exercising the power one has in responsible freedom. Both of these steps were involved in the prodigal's fully "coming to himself." It started back in the pigsty when he faces up to and accepted the true boundaries of his being, but it was not completed until there with the father he also accepted the strength

within those limits and resolved to begin to use it responsibly and not as a hired servant. This is what the prodigal had to go through in putting away childish things and becoming a man, and this is why the story has come to mean so much to me. It sets forth as clearly as anything I know this whole tricky process of growing up and negotiating entrance into maturity, and since we are all bound up in the necessity to do this, such a story can be a tremendous help.

However, this evening, instead of applying this parable to individual maturity, I would like to focus it in another direction, and use it on a framework of talking about the condition of our nation just now and what the Church is called to do in this hour.

There are many reasons for choosing to apply this parable in what may seem to be an unusual way. As we are gathered here tonight, we do represent the largest single Christian denomination in America outside the Roman Catholics, which means we have a significant responsibility to our nation. More than that, however, is the precedent of the Biblical evidence and the fact that the God of this book is depicted as being passionately concerned with history and what happens to the nations. This is why the prophets of the Old Testament were almost exclusively concerned with the affairs of Israel—her condition, her direction. Their concern for the nation and their concern for God were inseparably bound up together because they knew that what happened to the one was of great significance to the Other. This is also why Jesus can be seen weeping over Jerusalem, the capitol city of His beloved homeland, because "she did not know the things that made for peace" and was headed for calamity. Standing in this sort of tradition, we Southern Baptists cannot help but be concerned for our national life, and for that concern to mean anything, it must be coupled with insight into where we are as a nation. The genius of the Old Testament

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ment prophets were not so much their foresight as their insight; that is, they saw deeply and perceptively into what was going on in the present, and thus saw the implications resident there for the future. Sam Keen defines a wise man as one who knows what time it is in his life, and in this sense the prophets were wise — they knew better than most exactly what time it was in Israel's national life and what this demanded of the people of God. This sort of insight is exactly what we need just now as Christians in America, and I think the parable of the prodigal son can help us here, for it provides us with a frame of reference if we are willing to look at it that way.

America's adolescence

What I am suggesting is that in terms of national development, our country stands today where the prodigal stood in this parable, and what he went through in trying to grow up is what we are in the midst of just now. Please realize that as far as nations go, we are still very young. We will not even be two hundred years old until 1976, which means that we are just now moving out of our adolescence toward maturity. I would go on to suggest that World War II was the moment in our history when we gathered up our inheritance and left home, and the twenty-five years since then have been momentous ones indeed, leading us finally to a far country called Vietnam, where the many experiences of our history have all seemed to culminate in a painful "coming to ourselves" nationally.

How did we ever get into all this complexity? What prompted us to leave the simplicities of our childhood years? The answer to this question is the same as it was for the prodigal; namely, a whole combination of reasons, some good, some bad.

For example, our involvement in the wars with Germany and Japan and Korea and even North Vietnam have had an element of positive idealism in them, in that we were attempting to side with downtrodden people and keep some tyrannical force from overrunning and dominating them. I have a good friend who feels that Roosevelt and

Truman and Johnson were all "Christ-figures" in getting our country to intervene in foreign places to protect the freedom of other people, and while this may be overstating the case, there is nevertheless a real kernel of truth here. The same idealism that called the prodigal out of the nest is what called young America out of the isolation of her childhood.

By the same token, there also have been evidences of arrogance and insensitivity in our behavior as there were in the prodigal's. We have become somewhat messianic in thinking we had to police the whole globe and get involved in every conflict in every country. We also have been insensitive to many of the forces at work in the world, particularly the emergence of new nations out of colonialism. We have tended to see every issue since World War II simplistically as a struggle between Communism and anti-Communism, and as strategic as this contest may be, it is not the only dynamic alive on the world scene, but we have been slow to realize that.

What I am saying is that America moved out into the far country for the same mixture of reasons that propelled the prodigal, and what happened to him there is what has happened to us. In a word, we have experienced a demythologizing in the last twenty-five years, where our illusions have been stripped from us and our limits and weaknesses laid bare. What have these last two and one-half decades been if not a painful coming to ourselves in terms of our national identity?

America had no faults

It is absolutely essential to realize just how naive and innocent this country used to be about itself and its heritage. I grew up in the 1930's believing that America had no faults. Our nation was depicted to me as having been founded by God-fearing, freedom-loving people, and that we have developed from virtue to virtue without ever harming anyone, always siding with the right, never having started a war and never having lost one. In this, I think, I was pretty typical of our whole nation, and what a collision it was to have these myths of innocence shattered. I think it began with the dropping of the Bomb on Hiroshima and

Nagasaki. Even though elaborate rationalization was given for this action, the fact remained that it was America who ushered in the Nuclear Age, and is still the only nation to have dropped an atomic bomb on whole cities. And such an action was hard to reconcile with those childish images of pure goodness. A second agent of demythologizing was the civil rights movement of the 1950's. This one hit me right between the eyes, for suddenly I had to face up to the fact that all of this idealism about "the American Dream" had been empty rhetoric when it came to black people. We really had not tried to include them in the ideal. I still remember how shocked I was to find that at the moment Thomas Jefferson wrote the famous words of the Declaration of Independence about all men being created equal and having inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, that he was himself a slave owner, denying in practice the very precepts he professed so eloquently. For a whole generation of us, the civil rights movement called into question the whole fabric of American idealism. And finally as a climax has come the Vietnam struggle. More than anything else it has made us aware of our limits, of the fact that we cannot do everything everywhere at the same time. We are not omni-capable. It also has cast shadows on our real motivation, and caused some people to wonder if we do aspire to be a new colonial power and really want to dominate the globe. In short, the way we always have thought of ourselves has been profoundly shaken by what has happened in the last twenty-five years, and just like the prodigal, we as a nation find the innocent images of our childhood shattered all around our feet.

Where from here

Now the crucial question becomes: where do we go from here as a nation? How will we respond to this crisis of "coming to ourselves" nationally and being stripped of illusions? In my opinion, we have three alternatives. We could ignore the disclosures that have come to us in the last decades, and go on living with the childish fantasies that we are perfect and have no weaknesses or limits. In my judgment, the radical right-wing forces in the country are encouraging us in this direction, for they label as treason any criticism of America or acknowledgement of limitation. The second alternative is at the other extreme, and that is to become so shattered by our faults and limits that we pull back into ourselves and have a national nervous breakdown. And again, in my opinion, the radical left-wing forces are encouraging us in this direction with their total condemnation that charges America as being absolutely corrupt. The third alternative is to do what the prodigal did:

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President's Address (Continued from page 3)

I remember that farmer uncle tonight and when I am told that if the church does not lay down its life in service to a needy world our declaration of the gospel will fall on deaf ears.

It is true that at the heart of most of our problems is our unwillingness to serve in the Spirit of the cross but, hear me tonight, the harvest is the Lord's. It is ready for the reaping. Never has the ratio between readiness and reapers been so great. The harvest is everywhere, the whole world around, ready.

I like what Ernest Campbell said recently. In a sermon on the tower and the king going to war he said: "None of you would be so stupid as to plan a building unless he could finish it or start a war he could not win. Well, neither would God! He has the means to win and He means to win!"

In the midst of the plastic dance of circumstance, our God has prepared a harvest the proportion of which staggers the mind. No question about it, the harvest is ready.

There is more emptiness, loneliness, uncertainty, despair, and hopelessness in our world than perhaps even before. That's the harvest . . . crisis in innumerable lives all over the world.

II

Our Lord speaks also the Father's option in view of the harvest.

"Pray that He send."

This leaves no room for the "amateur providence" notion about who is to go. The choice is not ours concerning the person or the place.

I want to pause here and express my gratitude to God for having led us to provide six seminaries and mission leadership with vision enough to plan to reap the harvest both at home and abroad. It is my personal hope that we can scotch any talk, if such exists, of cutting back on any phase of our mission outreach.

We have laid our plans in faith, believing and expecting that the Lord of the harvest would exercise His option and send forth into the harvest His laborers. And, He is doing so! Wherever Christians gather, He is moving by His Spirit to thrust out those whom He chooses to send. Some of you come to this meeting tonight under the burden of a call to go. When you stand up to preach next Sunday, you will preach to some with whom He is dealing in a special way. They will be there, maybe standing in the pulpit, with no longer a reason to stay in the pastorate at home but a hundred reasons for going into the harvest fields afar waiting to be reaped.

And what is the key to all of this?

III

You wouldn't believe it. You will say, "It's all well and good, but it is too idealistic and impractical." And yet, the only order the Lord gave is this: "Pray."

The key to the whole missionary problem is in the hand of God, not of man, and, according to our Lord, the key is prayer, not ingenious human schemes. Indeed, one could build a strong case against us, based on our hope that if we get busy enough we may somehow avoid and evade the necessity of spiritual concentration.

Our Lord gave his disciples this key. It was not a common-sense key. It was not a medical key. It was not a civilizing key. It was not an educational key; not even an evangelical key; the key is prayer.

One of the first things that impresses me about this is the difference between our view of prayer and our Lord's view.

Someone is likely to go away from this place thinking: "Well, I had hoped to hear something more practical but all I heard suggested for a world-dying in sin was 'pray.' It is absurd to think that God is going to alter things in answer to prayer!" But, that is what Jesus said He would do and, if it is stupidity, it is stupidity based on His Redemption.

Can it be that we have said prayers so long until we inoculated ourselves against a consciousness of His continuing presence in our hearts? Or, have we said prayers in the vain hope of postponing an inevitable confrontation with a grieved Spirit by whose help we could really obey our Lord's order. The answer must come from your heart and mine. There it stands, "pray ye the Lord of the harvest that He send forth laborers into His harvest."

Perhaps every person here has heard the story which I first heard twenty-five years ago. It was cast in the setting of our Lord's exaltation and reunion with the angelic host. He was questioned about His plan for continuing His mission on earth. As I recall the story, He indicated that only a small band of disciples were left to continue His ministry. "But suppose they fail," "Then," said He, "I have no other plan."

Of course, the story cannot be true. There was no margin for failure in Redemption's purpose—just the possibility that each generation through disobedience of His Orders would fail to fulfill its mission.

This is where we stand tonight. We can recognize the Lord's ownership of the harvest; His option in sending reapers, His orders for His disciples, or, we can spend our time and energy in endless discussion about "how to get the show on the road again."

It's up to you, Southern Baptists, it's up to you!

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namely, to accept our limits, and within those limits to begin to exercise our strength in freedom and responsibility, and to come to this conclusion, our country needs the ministry of the Church as never before. It is the high calling of God in Christ Jesus just now for the Christian community to act out the role of the father in this parable and lead our nation in maturing. It would be suicidal if we try to ignore our limits and go on trying to police the whole world. At the same time, it would be tragic indeed for us to retreat back into a neo-isolationism and deprive the world of the role we have been gifted by God to play. The Church must speak out against both of these extremes, and point rather to the twofold secret of maturity; namely, the embracing of one's limits, and within those limits, the exercise of one's power. Our country is most emphatically not a world messiah called to dominate everything, but neither are we a hired servant. We are a "son of God" in the family of nations; we have real limitations, but within those limitations great responsibilities for the use of power in a way that will be humanizing for all the world.

Therefore, my challenge to all of us this evening is to be to our beloved country what the people of God and the spokesmen of God have always been—facilitators of maturity. Read carefully the words of prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah and see how they spoke to the nation and warned again and again for her neither to overreach in arrogance or underreach in apathy, but to be herself, the unique entity God had made her to be and wanted her to become. This is what we are called to do in our day—to be to America what the prophets were to Israel and the father was to the prodigal.

This is the challenge of this hour. God help us as the Body of Christ to fulfill it. God help our nation if we fail—both her and Him.

**What Are Baptists
Thinking?**

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