

## *A BITTER PARABLE – WHERE DID WE GO WRONG?*

There is a tragic parable that repeats itself all too frequently in many of our best parishes and Christian homes. While it has many variations, there are common threads that run through all its versions. The concluding punchline is usually a question raised very quietly: *Where did we go wrong?* The story is seldom told publicly, and when shared, it is delivered in hushed tones, usually by mothers with shed tears.

The story is about how many of our baptized sons and daughters – twentysomethings or even older – have made their exit from the Kingdom of God. They do not attend Christian worship services, they no longer confess Christ, and they often have animus toward those who do. In the Christian's spiritual warfare against the world, the flesh, and the Devil, it seems they have lost. Take Jennifer.

Jennifer, baptized as an infant, grew up in a church-going family. Her congregation championed the historic Christian faith as Luther recovered it and so did its long-term pastor. The family attended worship services regularly and Jennifer went to Sunday School and VBS as a young girl. Her father shied away from participation in the educational hour on Sundays, preferring instead, to talk congregational business out in the parking lot. Managing the physical and financial assets of the congregation was where he felt most comfortable. Jennifer's mother often attended adult Bible class. She also was an occasional teacher in the Sunday School and VBS when her daughter was young. Aside from memorizing some verses and studying for confirmation between Jennifer and her mother, any articulation of faith life at home was largely restricted to saying grace at dinner time.

Jennifer attended the public schools in the local school district because they had solid reputations for being excellent. Her high school was recognized for consistent high academic achievement and most of its students went on to college. Academically, she thrived at high school, making the honor roll more often than not. While occasionally attending the congregation's high school youth group, her most significant peer group friends were from the public high school. Beyond her studies, Jennifer's high school life was filled with sports, drama club, listening to hip-hop music, going to movies, and hanging-out with her school friends.

Upon graduation, Jennifer went off to State University as a resident student. During her first year away from home, her phone conversations with her parents sometimes included the question from her mother: *Are you going to church or involved in a campus ministry?* Jennifer often replied in a somewhat pained tone of voice; *Oh, Mother! Sometimes, when I can. I have to spend a lot of time on my studies, you know.* The fact is, as only learned later, Jennifer went a couple of times when she first arrived on campus, but since then, quit going entirely. She did attend worship with her parents, however, when she came home during Thanksgiving, Christmas, and other school breaks.

After the first year, visits home became less frequent. During her second year, Jennifer found a part-time job off campus working as a waitress. She now stayed at school to work during most school breaks. She also explained to her mother that she usually had to work the Sunday

morning shift and therefore could not attend campus worship. Phone calls to her folks back home became less frequent as well. Usually, it was Jennifer's mother who made the calls which often became strained. On one occasion Jennifer indicated to her mother that she believed that there were many valid expressions of human spirituality other than the traditions of Christianity. Each person needs to find what best suits them. On another occasion, she argued with her mother indicating that she thought that the Church had been guilty of hate and intolerance toward the LGBTQ community. The Church should not be so judgmental. It turns people off, she said. Jennifer accused her mother of being narrow-minded and indicated that she felt that sexual preferences are personal matters that everyone should respect.

When questioned by her mother concerning her living arrangements, Jennifer responded nonchalantly; *it's no big deal mom, most of my friends here at school are living together. I know you don't approve, but I have to live my own life.* To Mom's question, do you think God approves of what you are doing? Jennifer shouted back: *Don't give me any of your God-crap, Mother, I'm doing just fine without it . . .* and she hung up.

Sometime, somewhere, after she left home, Jennifer graduated from the Church's confession before graduating from State University. Her father has had very little to say about any of this. Occasionally, he tries to console his more-concerned wife. *We raised our daughter as best we could. She's a big girl now and has to live her own life. We have to accept her the way she is and be here when she needs us.* She is not consoled. Jennifer's mother is hurt, angry, and confused. While she is embarrassed to talk to her pastor or any of her church friends about Jennifer, she has many questions and is filled with self-doubt. She ponders over and over again; where did we go wrong?

What is it that the Christian community needs to understand and implement here in North America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to meet the challenge of faithfully nurturing our young baptized in the Lord? More pointedly, what do we need to know and do as parents, pastors, and parishes to prepare our children for the spiritual assault that they face today in our current anti-Christian culture? What do we need to provide that so often is not being provided, so that future Jennifer parents will not be pondering the question: where did we go wrong?

The last things needed to conclude reflection on this parable are some sentimental spiritual platitudes or words that gloss over the severity of the spiritual warfare our children face to retain and grow in their faith. Yes, we will pray for our now not-so-young children who no longer confess Christ. Yes, with God all things are possible, and He has not given up these children. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in search of the one who has strayed and is lost (Luke 15:3-7). Let us take comfort in these realities about our gracious Lord and God. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to take into account what was presented about our baptized children in Chapter 7:

*Often not taught or explained to parents, especially to fathers, is that their child's Baptism has landed her in a spiritual war zone where the Devil relentlessly prowls to get her back. The often-unspoken truth is that the Baptism of our kids has landed them in a life-long spiritual war with the Devil. Jesus taught; he who endures to the end, will be saved (Matthew 24:13). With his close allies – the fallen world (say, youth culture) and*

*the Sinful Self – Satan is working to see that your child is not one of them. They are out to make her collateral damage in the Kingdom of God.*

The Christian faith is all about understanding and appreciating that the problem of sin will always be our children's greatest problem. Sin has resulted in a death problem and as with all of us, they have it 24/7 (Romans 5:12, 21). Unsolved, it cancels the possibility of having a Happy Forever. About our death problem, Christianity presents only two options: You can die to sin in Christ, or you can just die. Dying and rising in the cross of Christ and being covered with His righteousness is the only solution to the death problem (Romans 5:3-11, 22-23). All other avenues just present escape and coping mechanisms. These biblical truths must command our greatest attention in the care and spiritual nurture of our children regardless of their age. Life with God in Christ means enjoying His undeserved forgiveness and favor, but it also means sharing in His undeserved suffering and the world's disfavor. If these realities about human existence and life in Christ are not understood and appreciated, being or remaining a Christian can make little sense. Then, other options, most any other options, can easily be seen as more attractive and fulfilling. We pray that God may enlighten and use parents, Servants of the Word, and Christian friends as His instruments to help our children deepen their understanding and appreciation of these realities . . . or, as with Jennifer, recover them for a Happy Forever.

Nurturing children in the midst of their spiritual warfare to live in the freedom of Grace and the bondage of the neighbor corresponds to a dual citizenship that God has called all of His Children to occupy as the Church Militant. Under the lordship of Christ, we are simultaneously citizens of the Kingdom of God and worldly earthly communities. We live a secure life as beggars of the grace that makes us free, and we live significant lives with works that bind us to our neighbors. These are great and wondrous truths about the fundamental identity of all of us, including our children - yes even the smallest of these. Yet we must always remember our children's very real spiritual warfare that will continually attack her in both communities. Attacks that will assault the life-giving freedom of grace, the bondage of the neighbor, or both. These children are simply on loan to us from their Heavenly Father and, through adoption, our brothers and sisters in the Gospel. Let us put away the glitter, the finger painting, and the silly things that we do in the name of Christian education and teach this paradoxical identity of life in the Cross of Christ. Let us rightly divide the Word of Truth, teaching and applying God's Law and His Gospel that our children might adopt a life-long habit of dying to live - dying to sin, and rising unto newness of life, serving Christ in the neighbors need - lords of all, beholding to none, and servants of all and subject to all. Let us nurture our children with the goal and confident hope that in that day when you gather your earthly family together in the fullness of salvation, by the grace of God, they will be there.

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