

Reading 1: Prodigal Parents

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Notes

Please write any comments or questions for discussion here.

Dear Concerned Citizen,

Christianity teaches that God is our loving father. Catholics often envision the Church as a loving mother. For most people throughout history these have been comforting images – a vast improvement over jealous or angry gods. But what happens to people whose experiences of their fathers and mothers are not so positive? Children of divorce often experience their fathers as absent or their mothers as preoccupied. Elizabeth Marquardt's book, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*, tells the heart-rending story of the spiritual struggles of the children of divorced parents.

Marquardt conducted intensive in-person interviews with 71 young adult college graduates, half of whom experienced the divorce of their parents before the age of 14, while the other half grew up in intact families. On the basis of her interviews she developed a set of survey questions that she addressed to 1500 randomly chosen young men and women from around the country between the ages of 18 and 35. Because all her subjects maintained some contact with both parents, they were spared the most devastating experience of divorce: the complete loss of contact with one parent. In other words, Marquardt made an effort to choose people who were functioning well, whose lives had not been completely ruined by divorce. She wanted to see the impact of divorce, even on those young people who had weathered it well.

Less than 20% of adult children of divorce consider themselves "very religious," compared with almost 30% of children from intact families. The children of divorce were four times more likely to agree "My father has done things I find hard to forgive," compared with those from intact families. Similarly, 20% of the adult children of divorce said that "my mother has done things I find hard to forgive."

Another woman described her disappointment with prayer:

“When stuff was happening that I didn’t understand, I’d be like, ‘Maybe I should pray.’ I’d sit down and go, ‘Okay, now how do I pray?’ You’d start it as a letter. ‘Dear God, how are you? I’m fine. Today was warm. I was hoping you could help me.’ But then you kind of wonder about it because they never answer. So that made me wonder, ‘Well, I wrote to him. I didn’t get a letter back. That sounds like Dad.”

Among the most poignant tales Elizabeth Marquardt tells about adult children of divorce is their response to the Biblical parable of the Prodigal Son. In their lives, people who left home never came back. They identified more with the forgiving father than with the sinful child. They saw themselves as willing to forgive, waiting for the prodigal to return home. But for them, it was a Prodigal Parent, rather than a Prodigal Son.

Some of Marquardt’s subjects interpreted the story differently. “They say that even if they had rebelled and left home, there would not have been a stable home for them to return to.” One woman went so far as to say, “I thought it was a nice idea if it would ever really work... to actually believe that you could just leave and the fact that love would always be constant. For me, it was like, if they love me, then why do they live so far away? Or why are they always going out with boyfriends....I figured if I left and went away, when I came back my house would be gone.”

One of the most troubling findings of Marquardt’s study was that of those who attended places of worship at the time their parents divorced, two-thirds say that no one, neither from the clergy or the congregation, reached out to help them. Many churches now have ministries for divorced members. Do those same churches have specific outreaches to their children? Perhaps some do. But all churches should.

The divorce culture poses a unique challenge to Christianity. Many of the central metaphors of Christianity are based on the family. God is the loving Father. Jesus is the bridegroom, and the Church is the Bride. Jerusalem and Zion are depicted as daughters of Yahweh. If the family breaks down, or becomes a source of pain rather than solace, the Christian message loses much of its appeal. In fact, the Christian message can become almost incomprehensible. For all these reasons, pastors need to attend seriously to the needs of the children of divorce. Reading Elizabeth Marquardt's honest book will be an essential aid to everyone who cares about healing their wounds.