

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON: A STORY OF HOMECOMING

This weekend we hear Jesus' story about the Prodigal Son, which is one of the most beautiful images of who God was for Jesus, and all of us. One of my favorite books based on that story is Henri Nouwen's *"The Return of the Prodigal Son."* There is a famous painting by Rembrandt which hangs in St. Petersburg Russia called "The Return of the Prodigal Son." Back in 1992 Henri Nouwen received permission to visit the museum which houses the masterpiece, and during the night after the museum was closed, Nouwen spent literally hours and days alone sitting in a chair gazing at the painting, studying every detail in hopes of discovering its spiritual reality. He then wrote a book based on his observations of that painting. **The Diocese of Saginaw has chosen that image for its representation of the Year of Mercy.**



Biblical scholars know this is an authentic teaching of Jesus because it goes against what anyone would have conceived as acceptable behavior between a father and child in Jesus' day or the relationship between God and us in any age or culture, for it reveals a compassionate God that forgives without condition, exception, limit or even real contrition. Nouwen felt that in some mysterious way the painting and that story were about himself and his spiritual journey, and shortly after writing his book based on the painting/story, he died. Within two pages I cannot do justice to the power of either the story of the Prodigal or what Nouwen saw revealed in the painting, so I encourage you to get a copy of the book for yourself. I would like, however, to highlight a few of Nouwen's insights from the book.

What scholars know about the story is that it isn't really about either son who, in closer reading, were both unacceptable, self-centered, and horrific children. The only difference between them was that one left home physically and the other stayed put but left home (and his father) emotionally and psychologically through his heart which had grown cold and lifeless. In the story from Luke chapter 15, you will notice that although the younger son asked for the money first - the money he would get as an inheritance upon the death of his father - the older son took the money also.

In the painting, you will notice that the older father looks almost blind and is bent-over, leaning into the embrace of his son. The father's mantle and arms are extended wide and welcoming to enfold the son and bring him closer into his heart. Notice that the older son stands stiffly erect to the right and his hands and mantle are closed and his robe hangs flat in a posture of stiffness, coldness, and hardness. The young man held and blessed by the father is poor both emotionally and physically. He left home with much pride and money, determined to live his own life far away from his father and his community. He returns with nothing; his money, his health, his honor (which is even more important than life and death to the culture in which Jesus lived), his self-respect, his reputation . . . everything has been squandered. Notice in the painting that his head is shaven. No longer the long curly hair of youth but the head of a prisoner who has lost his freedom and even his identity. When a man's (woman's) hair is shaved off, whether in prison or in the army, as in a hazing ritual, he/she is robbed of one of the marks of his/her individuality. The clothes Rembrandt gives him are underclothes, barely covering his emaciated body. In contrast, the red robes of the father and the older son speak of status and dignity. The kneeling son has no cloak and the yellow-brown, torn undergarment just covers his exhausted, worn-out body from which all strength is gone.

In his book, Nouwen states, *"I see before me a man who went deep into a foreign land and lost everything he took with him. I see emptiness, humiliation, and defeat. He who was so much like his father now looks worse than his father's servants. He has become like a slave. What happened to the son in the distant country? The sequence of events is quite predictable. The farther I run away from the place where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world."*

Nouwen draws a beautiful analogy between the father's forgiveness and being the one receiving the forgiveness. *"Receiving forgiveness requires a total willingness to let God be God and do all the healing, restoring, and renewing . . . As long as I want to do even a part of that myself, I end up with partial solutions . . . I still keep my distance, still revolt, reject, strike, run away . . . As the beloved son (daughter) of God, I have to claim my full dignity and begin preparing myself to become the father."* What Nouwen is suggesting is that once you receive the forgiveness of God, you have an obligation to pass that forgiveness on to others and that our quid pro quo mentality of thinking and acting is no longer acceptable, at least not for children of an all-forgiving God. A hard lesson for many of us to learn.

In the book, Nouwen asked a number of his friends what they saw in the painting, and one young woman looked at the head of the younger son and said, *"This is the head of a baby who just came out of his mother's womb. Look, it is still wet, and the face is still fetus-like."* Nouwen goes on to say, *"All of us who were present saw suddenly what she saw. Was Rembrandt portraying not simply the return to the Father, but also the return to the womb of God who is Mother as well as Father?"* The father's hands are spread out and touch the homecomer in a gesture of blessing. There is light on both faces, but the light from the father's face flows through his whole body - especially his hands - and engulfs the younger son in a great halo of luminous warmth; whereas the light on the elder son is cold and constricted. His figure remains in the dark, and his clasped hands remain in the shadows.

The parable that Rembrandt painted might well be called ***“The Parable of the Lost Sons.”*** Not only did the younger get lost but the one who stayed home also became a lost man. He stayed close - physically - to the father but became increasingly unhappy and unfree. In the book, as he reflects on the behavior of the older son, Nouwen says, ***“I wonder which does more damage, lust or resentment? There is so much resentment among the ‘just’ and the ‘righteous.’ There is so much judgment, condemnation, and prejudice among the ‘saints.’ There is so much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding ‘sin.’”*** Later Nouwen makes a beautiful affirmation about the God of Jesus Christ. ***“God is looking for you. He will go anywhere to find you. He loves you, he wants you home, he cannot rest unless he has you with Him.”***

Another person who Nouwen asked saw something unusual with the hands of the father in the painting; one looks masculine and the other feminine. ***“As I now look again at Rembrandt’s old man bending over his returning son and touching his shoulders with his hands, I begin to see not only a father who ‘clasps his son in his arms,’ but also a mother who caresses her child, surrounds him with the warmth of her body, and holds him against the womb from which he sprang. Thus the ‘return of the prodigal son’ becomes the return to God’s womb, the return to the very origins of being and again echoes Jesus’ exhortation to Nicodemus, to be reborn from above. Now I understand better also the enormous stillness of this portrait of God. There is no sentimentality here, no romanticism, no simplistic tale of a happy ending. What I see here is God as mother, receiving back into her womb the one whom she made in her own image. The near-blind eyes, the hands, the clock, the bent over body, they all call forth the divine maternal love, marked by grief, desire, hope, and endless waiting.”***

A short note aside; in the story told by Jesus in Luke’s Gospel, the author states that the father went out every day to watch and wait for his son to return. I had always thought that the father simply went on his front porch to sit in his rocking chair and look into the distant horizon for his child. What one biblical scholar has noted is that the father walked to the farthest outskirts of the town or village to look for his son and walked with one of the slaves as he journeyed. Can you imagine the humiliation of the townsfolk as they saw the elder, dignified landowner - who they must have considered a fool for given his children everything before his death - journey out to watch for his son’s return. This is the picture of a father who does not care what people think of him or even of his children. One scholar has noted that if the son returned to the village without the protection of the father present, the villagers would have killed the younger son because, in the story, it says that the younger son sold some of the property. We are all aware of how precious the land of Israel is to the people of Israel.

As the father walks, he journeys with one of his slaves who were considered members of the family, and as they walk the father talks and shares with the slave what’s in his mind and heart about this lost son of his. In Jesus’ day slaves were different than hired hands who had the freedom to leave one place of employment to find work elsewhere. Slaves were not free to leave the family and were in many ways considered to be part of the family. I often ask people where Jesus is in the story? We know Jesus is not the father in the story nor is he portrayed in the two sons. So where is he? Where has Jesus learned what resides in the mind and heart of the father? Where has he had the opportunity to walk with the Father to learn the way the Father feels and thinks about things? Jesus is the slave who walks daily with the Father as they journey to look for the lost children of God. Later in the book, Nouwen states that the same God who suffers because of his immense love for his children is the God who is rich in goodness and mercy and who desires to reveal to his children all his riches even when they are unearned or undeserved.

Notice in the story that the younger is never really sorry for his behavior. He finally decides to return home because he is hungry and he never does finish his confession and apology once he realizes that his father, upon seeing him, has already forgiven him. Not only does the father not give his son a chance to apologize, but, in fact, pre-empts his son’s begging by spontaneous forgiveness and puts aside his pleas as completely irrelevant. This is the image of Jesus’ God who forgives everyone and anyone regardless of their motivation or degree of sorrow or contrition. This is why scholars know this is an original teaching of Jesus, because it goes against everything we would consider acceptable in matters of God and faith. Not only does the father forgive without asking questions but cannot wait to give him new life in abundance. So strongly does God desire to give new life that in the story he seems almost impatient. The father dresses his son with the signs of freedom, the freedom of the children of God. God does not want any of God’s children to be outsiders, hired servants or slaves, but wants them to wear the robe of honor, the ring of inheritance, and the footwear of prestige. I have often seen another powerful message in the image of the father giving his returning son the gift of sandals. Sandals were not only for free people but they are also for walking. I believe by giving the son another pair of shoes the father is in effect saying to his son, “Anytime I want to walk away from me again, you are free to do so and I will still be here waiting for your return.

Although the story focuses a lot on the errors of the younger son, the older son was just as contemptuous to the father. In the story we are told that at the party the older son was standing outside and refused to go inside. In Jesus’ culture, if a wealthy land owner gave a party, it was the duty of the older son to act as host of the party. For the older son to stand outside and refuse to go inside - to make the father go outside to beg him to come in - was an outward sign of disdain and social insult for the father and what the guests thought of the father. Here again we find an image of Jesus in the story as the slave who goes outside to announce to the older sibling what the father has done/is doing and challenges the older son as to what his behavior or attitude will be now. Here we see that the elder sibling had even forgotten what it means to be a part of a family, for in the world of Jesus, to be without family was to be considered dead. Jesus’ story concludes opened-ended and we are never told what the older son did. Did he have a change of heart? Did he finally begin to see and feel with the heart of the father? Did he ever begin to really understand? Do we?

Nouwen concludes his book with these words; ***“I had little idea how much I would have to live what I then saw. I stand with awe at the place where Rembrandt brought me. He lead me from the kneeling, disheveled young son to the standing, bent-over old father, from the place of being blessed to the place of blessing. As I look at my own aging hands, I know that they have been given to me to stretch out toward all who suffer, to rest upon the shoulders of all who come, and to offer the blessing that emerges from the immensity of God’s love.”***