

Rio Rancho Presbyterian

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Rio Rancho, NM

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THE FORGIVING FATHER

Luke 15: 1-2, 11b-32

In 1983 Henri Nouwen, the famous Catholic spiritual writer, was in the village of Trosly, France. He was spending a few months at L'Arche, a community for people with mental disabilities. Nouwen had just completed a six-week lecture tour across the United States speaking out against the violence in Latin America. He came to L'Arche physically and spiritually depleted. Nouwen admitted he was "anxious, lonely, restless and very needy." In a word, he was tired, dead tired.

One of his co-workers there invited Nouwen into her office. On the door a large poster was pinned. It was a reproduction of Rembrandt's masterpiece, The Prodigal Son. Nouwen being Dutch was of course interested in the most famous Dutch painter ever-Rembrandt. Now when Nouwen first saw the picture, he said, "I could not take my eyes away. I felt drawn by the intimacy of the picture, the old man touching the boy's shoulder. That picture reached me in a place where I had never been reached before."

Initially Nouwen identified with the prodigal, since he too was “exhausted from his long travels.” Describing the impact of the image upon him Nouwen noted, “It represents the ongoing yearning of the human spirit, the yearning for a final return, an unambiguous sense of safety, a lasting home.”

Three years later Nouwen had resigned his teaching position at Harvard and had joined the L’Arche community in Toronto. Before going there he was invited to tour the Soviet Union with friends. They made plans to visit Saint Petersburg to see the Hermitage, the world-famous art museum. Housed in the Hermitage is Rembrandt’s original painting of the Prodigal Son. On Saturday, July 26, 1986, at 2:30 the afternoon Henri Nouwen saw for the first time Rembrandt’s rendition of our text from Luke 15. Nouwen was amazed at the sheer size of the painting, eight feet tall and six feet wide. For two hours Nouwen stared in wonder and awe at this magnificent oil painting. I invite you to go online and see for yourself.

Five days later Nouwen returned to the Hermitage, and this time sat in a chair staring at the painting for four hours. Needless to say, it was a transformative moment. When he left, he vowed never to be without a reproduction of Rembrandt’s masterpiece. So when

he arrived in Toronto, the first thing he did was hang a reproduction of that painting in his office.

That painting inspired Nouwen to write his wonderful book **The Return of the Prodigal**. His book invites us to identify with all three of the parable's main characters: the prodigal, the elder son, and the father. It is easy to see why Nouwen at first identified with the prodigal, limping home from a far country. Just as Nouwen had found himself limping spiritually after his long tour of America. Both were depleted and exhausted.

It is odd that Rembrandt himself may have felt the same way in the Seventeenth Century as he painted this picture. At the end of his life Rembrandt was lonely and poor and depleted. In his youth he had lived large, very famous and very arrogant. As a painter he made lots of money which he spent lavishly. And through it all, he was a man exceedingly hard to get along with. He was filled with resentments and often a desire for revenge.

For all his gains, there were far many losses-he lost his beloved wife, his three sons and two daughters. He then had an unhappy affair, after which the woman was committed to an insane asylum and there died. Another woman with whom he had a relationship also died. He was involved in countless lawsuits and legal conflicts.

His popularity as a painter plummeted. He ended up essentially bankrupt, his paintings sold to pay off his many debts.

Yet, thankfully in his later years Rembrandt experienced a modicum of peace. He began to view the human condition with a more sympathetic eye. He had suffered much and now he began to paint the tragic dimensions of life, the heartaches and the heart breaks. In the last year of his life when he paints the prodigal son, Rembrandt had become the broken young man, on his knees, craving his father's warm embrace. He is the prodigal come home.

Although much of the attention of this parable and indeed the painting focuses on the prodigal son, Nouwen insists we must not forget the elder son. He stands over against his father and his brother in every sense of the word. He is censorious and aloof, angry and upset. Nouwen admits that as the oldest child in his own family he often resented his younger siblings, what they "got away with". Like many dutiful children, he often disguised his real feelings. For the older brother, it was a bitter pill indeed to see his younger brother receive such a lavish welcome.

You can hear it in his complaint that he has worked all those years without even one party. And now this younger brother who had wasted all his money "with prostitutes" is welcomed home with a

feast! The bitter invective shows that the older brother “no longer has a brother, nor any longer a father”. He too is lost in a far country, that dark world of resentment.

Now the real hero of this parable is of course the forgiving father. It appears that he already knew the gist of that best seller by Mel Robbins entitled “The Let Them Theory”. As that theory suggests, he relinquished control of his son, though it broke his heart. In contrast, I am reminded of one of my favorite jokes. What is the difference between a Rottweiler and a Jewish mother? Well, the Rottweiler eventually lets go! Likewise, this loving father lets go and his vagabond son wanders lost in a “far country”, far, far away from home.

But when this broken son returns, the father treated him like a beloved child. “This son of mine was dead and now he is alive; he was lost and now he is found.” So he called for the best robe in the house, a ring for his finger and sandals for his bare feet. And then the fattened calf was prepared and the merry making began. My son is found. My son is alive and home at last! “Amazing grace! How sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see!”

The loving father embraces with unconditional love his son who ran away and seeks out his son who never left. His forgiveness extends to both equally-the kid who threw away everything and the kid who claimed he never got enough. He loves them both and invites them both to the celebration, the homecoming. And we are left wondering if the elder son ever showed up, ever was reconciled. Did he “ever come home”?

Nouwen came to realize in reflecting on this parable and Rembrandt's painting there is something beyond “the call to return”. It is the call to become like the father, the forgiving, loving and compassionate parent of both boys. Nouwen wrote this: “When I first saw Rembrandt's Prodigal Son, I could never have dreamt that becoming the repentant son was only a step on the way to becoming the welcoming father. I now see that the hands that forgive, console and offer a festive meal must become my own hands. Becoming the father is for me the surprising conclusion to all my reflections on this parable.”

Perhaps this is the ultimate summons of this Parable. It is about a young man who wanders off into a far country and returns broken and repentant. It is about an older son who stays at home and harbors his resentments against his brother and even his father.

But most of all, it is about a father who reaches out in forgiveness to both his errant sons, one who was lost and then found, the other who was lost and did not know it.

The challenge is to become like the God who loves us with an unconditional and everlasting love. The One who says to us, “Welcome home, my beloved child.” Thanks be to our God who “so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life.”

Amen.