

Sermon – Lent 4 – St Luke and St Matthew Brooklyn

Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32

Our life of faith is a journey deeper into God's love, letting go of the anxieties of life, of fear, of worry and allowing ourselves to be loved and forgiven. In doing so, we are more able to reflect the love of God in the world by exhibiting more like Christ-like behaviors, especially love and compassion.

Today's Gospel account from Luke is the last of three parables Jesus tells the Pharisees and the scribes, who were complaining that Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. The first parable tells of the shepherd and the lost sheep – the one of the 100 that goes missing, the dutiful shepherd that searches for it and the celebration that ensues when it is found. The second parable tells of the woman who lost a coin in her home. She searches by dutifully sweeping the floor and then celebrating with a neighbor when she finds the coin.

The third parable is a little more nuanced in its message. The three main characters, a father and his two sons, all have something to reveal to us through their actions.

Henri Nouwen, a Roman catholic priest and spiritual writer was one person who was moved by the parable through the medium of Rembrandt's painting called "The Return of the Prodigal Son." There is a copy of this painting in your bulletins. Nouwen wrote a book, titled the same, which set out his reflections of how his encounter with the painting, and the parable it is drawn from, shaped his life at a pivotal moment of discernment.

Nouwen wrote, "Moving from teaching university students to living with mentally handicapped people was, for me at least, a step toward the platform where the father embraces his kneeling son. It is the place of light, the place of truth, the place of love. It is the place where I so much want to be, but am so fearful of being. It is the place where I will receive all I desire, all that I ever hoped for, all that I will ever need, but it is also the place where I let go of all I most want to hold on to. It is the place that confronts me with the fact that truly accepting love, forgiveness, and healing is often much harder than giving it. It is the place beyond earning, deserving, and rewarding. It is the place of surrender and complete trust."¹

In the painting the younger son has returned from his adventurous journey broke and disheveled and is kneeling at the feet of his father. The setting as interpreted by Rembrandt as different from the biblical parable. In his painting the figures are still, the father and his younger son embrace gently, the older son is present, if slightly remote from the action. The three principal figures are bathed in light and two other people look on from the shadows, eyes fixed on the action.

¹ Nouwen Henri *The Return of the Prodigal Son* 1994, Doubleday NY p13

In Nouwen's encounter with Rembrandt's painting of the parable, he saw a parallel with his own spiritual journey from being the carefree younger son, to the dutiful older son, and finally to being the father figure where he found a sense of true inner freedom. In the younger son, he saw his life of plenty. It was a life of extensive academic achievement, travels across the world lecturing and promoting his many books and the company of many people from all walks of life. In the end, it left him feeling homeless, lost and very tired.

I can identify with Henri Nouwen as I reflect on my own life. I left home at 17 for a life of independence living at the beach. I was working and had my own money. I had a car and could travel anywhere. I partied just about every weekend and didn't seem to have a care in the world. But I was lost as well. I returned home to my parents 12 years later, broke after an encounter with a person who swindled me out of a lot of money. I was broken physically and spiritually.

When Nouwen explained his connection with the younger son to a friend, the friend wondered whether he was in fact more like the older son. Nouwen was the eldest child in his family and had lived a quite dutiful life. He thought his entire life had consisted of being quite responsible, traditional and homebound. He suddenly saw other traits in his life that were more hidden. He saw his jealousy, anger, touchiness, doggedness, sullenness and subtle self-righteousness.² These traits were always there but he suppressed them. He realized that this person was just as lost as the other son.

I was also the eldest son in my family. On my father's deathbed when I was 30, he asked me to take care of my mother. I took this responsibility very seriously. My life changed as I assumed more and more care for my mother. My younger brother took no such care. He struggled with addiction which claimed nearly all his attention. Despite living closer he never visited our mother and the only time he called was when we wanted money. I became resentful of him as I slowly drowned in the stress of caring for my mother as she aged and moved to ever more intensive assisted living. I too had become lost in the intensity of my responsibility and loyalty to the promise I made my father. It had become all consuming.

In one of Nouwen's enforced retreats from life he embarked on a deeper study of Rembrandt's painting. He was in personal pain in one of his depressive periods. He wondered about what led Rembrandt to paint this father figure "holding his son in a gesture of all-forgiving compassion."³ Rembrandt had after all journeyed from being a young painter, embraced by society and flush with cash to an older man, whose wife and children had died and whose fortune had been squandered. This painting was one, if not the, last painting he completed before he died at 63 years old. It was after a life of immense ups and downs that he painted this picture of "true spiritual paternity."

² Ibid p20

³ Ibid p21

Nouwen's friend said to him, "Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father."⁴ The father figure in the painting stands over his son as they embrace. The son's head nestled tenderly into his father's chest. The father's hands lovingly and assuredly resting on his son's shoulders. He gazes down at his head, maybe with a tear in his eye as he soaks up the truth of his son's return.

As people of faith we all might desire to be here, kneeling before a benevolent and loving father, wanting to let go of everything we've done and just bathe in the warmth and love of being received with joy, compassion and forgiveness. But to feel this deeply we must let go of all that we hold tight and be as the father and son are. As Nouwen said, "It is the place beyond earning, deserving, and rewarding. It is the place of surrender and complete trust."

Our spiritual life is the journey from being a child to being a compassionate father or mother. Too many people stay perpetually in the child role in which they were cast at birth. The interior work we do as Christians by nurturing our souls to maturity, allows us to move into this place of compassion.

Jesus used this parable to rebut the Pharisees' claim that he was too close to sinful people. He wanted to make clear that the God he spoke of was a God of compassion who lovingly welcomes sinners back into a loving embrace. This I feel was the journey Rembrandt was on in the final years of his life. In the end, he saw the need for compassion and this flowed out of him as he composed the painting to depict the father figure in this pose.

Jesus told us "to be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate." This is the core gospel message for us. We are called to move from seeing ourselves as belonging to the world to belonging to God. The way we are called to love one another is God's way.

Nouwen eventually saw himself in all three main characters in this parable. The journey for us is a spiritual one where hopefully we will discover within ourselves "not only the lost children of God, but also the compassionate mother and father that is God."⁵

Amen.

⁴ Ibid p22

⁵ Ibid p23