

"*The Prodigal Sons*", 📖 Luke 15:11-32 Pastor Bob Leroe, Clifftondale Congregational Church, Saugus, Massachusetts 2004 Lenten community meditation

When I told a friend I was preaching on the parable of the Prodigal Son, he raised a question: "Who is the most stressed out in this parable?" I thought the son, the father, and the older brother were in different ways pretty stressed. But I was wrong. My friend said the one most stressed out of all was the fatted calf!

Henri Nouwen is one of my favorite authors. I met him at a lecture he gave at St Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco. I told him, "I'm one of the Protestants who snuck in." He replied, "I'm probably more popular among you guys!" Nouwen is must reading for anyone who wants to consider a deeper spiritual life. He used to live in our area when he served on the Harvard faculty. His book *The Wounded Healer* has been read by most ministers, and his life was a model of compassion. A book of his that many people read during Lent is *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

In July of 1986, Nouwen traveled to Russia and spent a few weeks at the Hermitage in St Petersburg, Russia, in order to see a painting by a "fellow Dutchman"—Rembrant's *the Prodigal Son*. It was one of the artist's last works. The Hermitage is one of the largest art museums in the world, yet Nouwen traveled there to see but one painting. He sat for several days, quietly reflecting, absorbing the masterpiece. A copy of that painting is before you. The original had been acquired by Catherine the Great in 1766. Nouwen writes, "I wanted also to be embraced by the welcoming father...I was the son exhausted from long travels, looking for home where I could feel safe." Nouwen was stunned by the painting's majestic beauty and its size, larger than life, 8 feet by 6 feet. He says "Its grandeur and splendor made everything recede into the background and held me completely captivated."

In the parable, the younger son asks for his inheritance--an unusual request. The boy was in effect saying, "I don't want to have to wait around for you to die to get what's mine, Dad; since you haven't died soon enough to suit me, I want what's mine **now**." He was restless, and his imagination conjured up exotic, far away places. He could picture the excitement of total freedom from authority.

The father allows his younger son to leave. Sometimes the worst thing God can do is to give us what we want--to show us that getting what we want won't necessarily bring satisfaction. When we rebel against God's will He sometimes says, "All right, *your* will be done! See how you like it! God's most severe punishment may be to leave us alone and let us go our own way.

Gathering up his things, the prodigal leaves for a "far country"; a place which exists first in our hearts. Like so many of us, his happiness depended upon his circumstances; he was not content with his situation. He yearned for freedom without restraint and ended up enslaving himself. When his money ran out, his so-called friends deserted him--they were only friends of his wealth. He learned the hard way that we can't enjoy the things money **can** buy if we ignore the things money **cannot** buy.

Destitute, he was forced to do for a stranger what he refused to do for his own father--to work. For anyone Jewish, there could be no more demeaning labor than to be a swineherd. The "husks" or "pods" of vs. 16 were likely the fruit of the carob tree, which only those in abject poverty would eat.

We often meet our destiny on the road we take to avoid it. The lost son "*came to his senses*", and "*found*" himself. He complains about no one but himself, and speaks of no unworthiness but his own. He doesn't blame his troubles on his companions. He has reached rock bottom, and his only remaining option is repentance.

Realizing how well his father treated the servants, he turns toward home. It seemed unlikely that his father would allow him back, even as a servant...but he had reached the point of desperation. What kind of reception would he receive? Would he be turned away by the father he rejected? Some Bible teachers say this story should be called "the Parable of the Compassionate Father". The father runs to meet his son half-way, and lovingly embraces him. In the painting, the father's two hands are different: the left hand is strong and muscular, a firm grip; the right hand is soft, tender, like the caressing hand of a mother. And the red cloak is like a sheltering tent, a safe place. Are we willing to be touched by those hands and let ourselves be loved by God?

He begins his prepared speech, but doesn't get to finish, for his father calls to the servants to bring out the best *robe*--to cover the son's poverty and shame; and a *ring*--as a seal and symbol of his identity as a member of the household; and *shoes*--so that he can now walk in a new way (also, shoes were not worn by servants)! The father welcomes him back into all the privileges of the family and treats him with honor. He then directs the servants to prepare a feast! Everything this wayward son hoped to find in the far country he discovered back home.

We could stop here, but the story isn't over yet. The first-born son is informed of his brother's return, and is furious. He feels betrayed, and bitterly complains that mercy has been wrongly lavished on this rebel. Not wanting to even speak his brother's name or acknowledge the family relationship, he rebukes his father in verse 30 for welcoming "this son of *yours*, who has devoured your wealth..." In Rembrandt's painting, there is a large open space separating the father and his elder son, a space that creates tension; the elder son is keeping his distance, outside of this circle of love, resentful and resisting, unwilling to participate in the welcome.

This older brother remained at home, out of trouble, obeying the rules. Outwardly he was in compliance with his father, but inwardly, he too was far from home. This parable is really about **two** prodigal sons. Both were slaves--the younger by misusing his inheritance, and the older through bitterness. The prodigal's father chose to forgive, but the older brother refused. If we harbor an unforgiving, "older brother" attitude we cannot be in fellowship with God. This parable is *open-ended*. The Story-Teller invites us to reply to the father's gentle response in our own way.

Henri Nouwen realized after considering Rembrandt's painting and the parable, that he had been playing the role of observer, instructing people on various aspects of the spiritual life. But sitting before Rembrandt's painting he saw that he needed to kneel down and let himself be held by his forgiving heavenly Father. When we come to God, He gives His best even though we're filthy,

even if all we have to offer is our guilt. The Father is ready to run to us with open arms, and to offer the embrace of reconciliation. We can only be healed when the Father reaches down, as in the painting. In the parable, both sons are far from home--one geographically, both spiritually. To them, and to us, the Father earnestly, tenderly calls: "Come home, come home, you who are weary come home."

Prayer: Holy Father, we are not worthy to be called Your children, or even Your servants. Thank You for Your willingness to embrace us and make us Your own, through the sacrifice of Christ, our Savior and Lord, Amen.