

Lost Son #1 or Looking For Love in All the Wrong Places

Luke 15:11-19 by Patty Friesen (Fourth Sunday of Lent, March 27/22)

Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen says today's parable of the Prodigal Son should be called *The story of two lost sons and a father*. It is a three part drama with three major players, the younger son, the father and the elder son and each deserve their own sermon on Fourth Lent, Palm Sunday and Easter. I have preached this lost family trilogy a number of years ago but just like we enjoy reruns of our favourite TV shows, let's enjoy this sermon rerun and I'm sure no one remembers it from the first time I preached it anyhow.

I will be using Henri Nouwen's reflections on Rembrandt's famous painting *The Return of the Prodigal*. (Slide) Rembrandt completed this work shortly before his death in 1669. It is the signature work of his faith – the Gospel encapsulated in one image. *The Return of the Prodigal* painting is in The Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. Named The Hermitage as a place of contemplation, Rembrandt's work of art invites contemplation. Henri Nouwen himself spent four hours with this piece and it became a turning point in his career. After this he quit teaching at Harvard Divinity School in Boston and moved to the L'Arche community for differently abled adults in Montreal. He said, "I was that younger son; exhausted from long travels. I was looking for a home where I could feel safe. I needed a place where I could belong, a place where I could feel at home."

The story begins: There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So

the father divided his property between his two sons. A few days later, the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country. This is a shocking opener for those listening to Jesus' story. For a son to ask for the inheritance before his father's death, means he can't wait for his father to die. I don't think we can grasp how offensive this is in an ancient Middle Eastern culture where respect for elders is the highest value. Furthermore, that he leaves for a distant culture is equally offensive. We can't understand this because in our culture, we all leave home sometime. In fact, our parents can't wait to get us out of the house. But in biblical Middle Eastern culture, leaving home is a defiant rejection of the precious relationships in family and the larger community. One interpreter said, the younger son's sin is not in wild living but in leaving home in the first place. Going to a distant country suggests that he hates his family so much that he can't get away far enough.

(Rembrandt's Wild Son slide) And if all this isn't bad enough, the verse ends, "there he squandered his property in dissolute living." His foolishness is compounded by his waste of money. The foreign woman in the far left corner hints at what he spent his money on. This earlier painting of the Prodigal Son in action is a self-portrait of Rembrandt when he was 30 years old and living the high life as a successful painter. Notice the peacock feather in his hat – the symbol of arrogance. This painting was X-rayed, and they found a naked lute player that had been painted over. It appears that Rembrandt was censored in this painting. It is generally believed that Rembrandt's mother was an Anabaptist but it appears that Rembrandt himself left Anabaptism for a distant country of self-fulfillment.

Scripture suggests that the prodigal lost himself in this stage of his life. He forgot who he was and to whom he belonged. He was looking for love in all the wrong places. This is a world that fosters the addictions portrayed in the painting. Our addictions for wealth and power, over-consumption of food and drink and for sexual gratification without distinguishing between lust and love. These addictions fail to satisfy our deepest needs. In these days of society's increasing addictions, we have wandered far away from home and live in a distant country away from God and ourselves and our loved ones.

Biblical wisdom in the Book of Proverbs suggests saving money for rainy days – but when in verse 14, the prodigal had spent all his money, famine took place throughout that distant country and he began to be in need. He became so desperate that he hired himself out as a slave, hoping he could eat pig slop but no one would even give him that. At this point of desperation, the lowest of the low, he has a conversion experience. Verse 17, but *when he came to himself* he said, How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father and I will say to him, Father I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son, treat me like one of your hired hands.

The prodigal comes to himself or remembers whose child he is when he's at the very bottom and sometimes that's where we end up, flat on our faces before we can turn things around. The prodigal's repentance is somewhat self-serving, he will return home, not out of love for his father but out of a need for food. It is a reluctant repentance, a reluctant admission that he messed up and can't make it on his own. It

doesn't suggest that he is truly sorry for what he has done or that he is going to change his arrogant attitude. He is coming home with his tail between his legs, expecting a just beating. While he remembers he is his father's son, he doesn't trust he will be welcomed home and loved. He doesn't really trust in his father and he doesn't really trust in himself.

One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness. There is something in we humans that keeps us clinging to our past resentments and prevents God from effecting any real change in us. While God wants to restore me to the full dignity of God's child, I keep insisting that I will settle for being a hired servant. Do I want to be truly restored to the full responsibility of being a mature person? Do I truly want to be so totally forgiven that a completely new way of living becomes possible? Do I trust myself and such a radical reclamation? Do I want to break away from my deep-rooted running away and surrender myself so absolutely to God's love that a new person can emerge? Receiving forgiveness requires a total willingness to let God be God and do all the healing, restoring and renewing. God takes the initiative in our healing as the father takes initiative with his younger son, lost son #1. P.53 Nouwen

(Return to first painting)

So the younger son set off and went to his father but while he was still far off, his father saw him and filled with compassion, he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Rembrandt did some sketches of the father running to the son but settled on this simple still life embrace filled with silent acceptance and light. The desperate state of the younger son is accentuated by his shaven head – gone are the arrogant locks of Rembrandt's previous self-portrait. His head is bald, like a newborn's and

buried in his father's abdomen because he cannot look him in the face. It appears as if he is a bald newborn coming out of his mother's womb. Is Rembrandt portraying not only the return to the Father, but also the return to the womb of God who is Mother as well as Father?

The prodigal's robe is gone, likely gambled away, his clothing torn and the sole of his sandal has broken away, exposing a bare foot in a state of utter humility. But he has a sword at his side, likely given to him by his father as a sign of his son-ship. That he still has this sword in his possession suggests that he kept the symbol of son-ship. While he left his father, he remembered that he still belonged to him. This is an important biblical point. In Genesis, even after Cain kills his brother, God tells him, I will protect you for you are made in my image. No matter how far we stray, we still belong to God for we are created in the image of God. The younger son, for all his offensiveness knows to whom he belongs to and to whom he can return. His face here is indistinguishable of age, race or even gender. He could be anyone of us. We too are held in the embrace of our Divine parent and are surrounded by light.

The Gospel is all here. This is God's call for us to make our home in God as God makes it in us. The lost son is no longer just one repentant sinner, but the whole of humanity returning to God. The broken body of the prodigal becomes the broken body of humanity, and the baby-like face of the returning child becomes the face of all suffering people longing to re-enter God's house. Thus Rembrandt's painting becomes more than the mere portrayal of a moving parable. It becomes the summary of our salvation. The light surrounding father and son now speaks of the light that awaits all children of God. There is light but there are also the critical eyes of the onlookers.

They add a restraining note to the joy in the painting and prevent any notions of a quick, romantic solution to the questions of spiritual reconciliation. The journey of the younger son cannot be separated from that of his elder brother, lost son #2 to whom we will turn our attention on Palm Sunday. Let us pray:

Accepting God, you receive each one of us just as we are, with all our faults and our inherent belonging to you. Thank you that no matter how far we roam, we are never too far away. Amen.