

Fable of the Forgiving Father

Luke 15:20-24 by Patty Friesen (Feb. 28/16)

(Rembrandt painting) Today's forgiving father is literally the center of the Luke 15, in verses 20-24 on the prodigal son. He is also in the middle of Rembrandt's painting, centered not by position but centered by light. He is actually the source of light in the painting. This is one of Rembrandt's last paintings, one to which he came only after a life of suffering. It is called the Return of the Prodigal, but it should be called the Welcome of the Father, the emphasis in the painting being more on the father than the son.

Every detail of the father – his facial expression, posture, the colours of his clothes and most of all, the still gesture of his hands speak of God's immense love in the most poignant of artistic expressions ever created. Everything comes together here – Rembrandt's personal story, the story of humanity and God's story. This is Rembrandt's brilliance. Everything comes together here – spiritual truth completely enfleshed, God in the physicality of this aging parent, the Gospel in the specific, concrete and describable.

(Simeon painting) Rembrandt had always been interested in older people. He had drawn them, etched them and painted them ever since he was a young man and became increasingly fascinated by their inner beauty. Some of Rembrandt's most stunning portraits are of older people. As the light in his work interiorizes, he begins to paint blind people as the real see-ers, as in this portrait of the blind Simeon who also feels and spiritually sees the truth of the Christ child he holds, much like the forgiving father welcomes the prodigal with his blind eyes and hands.

(back to welcoming father) The father uses his hands to feel his son, like blind Isaac felt for his son Jacob. Remember this blindness is Rembrandt's interpretation. In the biblical text, the father has sight and is watching for the son and runs to him and in earlier sketches, Rembrandt drew the seeing, running father but as he approached death, Rembrandt chose to portray a very still father who recognizes his son, not with physical eyes but with the inner eye of his heart. His seeing is an eternal seeing, a seeing that reaches out to all of humanity. It is the seeing that understands the lostness of women and men of all times and places, that knows with compassion, the suffering of those who have chosen to leave home. This parent wants their children to be free, free to leave home and go to a distant country and possibly lose everything. This parent suffers with the child's free choice and pain but doesn't try to prevent their pain. This parent patiently welcomes the child home unconditionally, under any circumstance and allows them to leave again if they have to. This is the God I want to believe in: a God who from the beginning of creation, has never forced anyone, but always waited, arms outstretched to receive and bless with hands.

Let's look at God's hands. The left hand touching the son's shoulder is strong and muscular. The fingers are spread out and cover a large part of the prodigal's shoulder and back. There is a certain pressure, especially in the thumb. That hand seems not only to touch, but with its strength, also to hold and grip. How different is the right hand. This hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft and very tender. The fingers are close to each other and they have an elegant quality. It lies gently upon the son's shoulder. It wants to caress, to stroke and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother's hand. It is the hand of the God of Isaiah who declared, Can a woman forget her

baby at the breast, feel no pity for the child she has birthed. Even if these were to forget, I shall not forget you. Look, I have engraved you on the palm of my hands.

God has masculine and feminine hands. God grasps and caresses. God confirms and consoles; this parent in whom, both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood are fully present. The caressing feminine hand parallels the bare, wounded foot of the son, protecting the vulnerable side of the son, while the masculine hand parallels the foot of the sandal reinforcing the son's strength and desire to get on with his life.

And then there is the great red cloak. With its warm colour and its arch-like shape, it offers a welcome place. At first, the cloak covering the bent-over body of the father looks like a tent inviting the tired traveler to find some rest. Henri Nouwen said after awhile the cloak came to be stronger than a tent and became the sheltering wings of the mother bird in Jesus' words, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings." And in the bird image of the psalmist, "You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, and abide in the shade of the Almighty, say to your God, My refuge and my strength, my God in whom I trust. You hide me with your feathers and under your wings, I find refuge." Nouwen went farther to describe the bald prodigal as a newborn coming out of the womb of the parent, again echoing Jesus' words to Nicodemus to be born again.

CS Lewis said the church doesn't need better arguments about God, we need better metaphors. This from the master of metaphors in the Chronicles of Narnia. Rembrandt gives us metaphor here, a better argument about God, a better picture of God than we have ever seen. There is no sentimentality here, no romanticism, no simplistic

tale with a happy ending. Here is God receiving back into her womb, the one whom she made in her own image. The near-blind eyes, the hands, the cloak, the bent-over body, all call forth the divine maternal loved, marked by grief, desire, hope and endless waiting.

And this is a divine mother who is ready to party at her son's return. She needs us as much as we need her. Quick, she says, bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fat calf and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mind was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.

The father-mother doesn't even give the son a chance to apologize, and pre-empts his begging by spontaneous forgiveness and puts aside his pleas as completely irrelevant in the light of the joy at his return. Not only does the mother-father forgive without asking questions, but cannot wait to give him new life, life in abundance. Impatiently bossing the servants, nothing is good enough. The very best must be given to him. While the son is prepared to be treated as a hired servant, the father calls for the robe reserved for a distinguished guest; and although the son no longer feels worthy to be called son, the father-mother gives him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet to honour him as beloved son and restore him as heir.

Again there are echoes of this divine eagerness throughout scripture. In the fourth vision of the prophet Isaiah, "Yahweh showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of Yahweh. Now Joshua was dressed in dirty clothes as he stood before the angel. The latter then spoke as follows to those who were standing before him. Take off his dirty clothes and dress him in splendid robes and put a turban on his head. So they put a turban on his head and dressed him in clean clothes, while the angel of Yahweh

stood by and said, “you see, I have taken your guilt away.” The angel of Yahweh then made this declaration to Joshua, Yahweh Sabaoth says this, If you walk in my ways and keep my ordinances, you shall govern my house, you shall watch over my courts, and I will give you free access among those in attendance here. So listen, High Priest Joshua. I shall remove this country’s guilt in a single day. On that day invite each other to come under your vine and your fig tree.

This invitation to celebration and intimacy with God is re-enacted at each communion where we remember with a taste of bread and grape, the Last Supper Jesus had with his disciples but also the splendid wedding feast at the close of time. “The reign of the Lord our God Almighty has begin; let us be glad and joyful and give glory to God, because this is the time for the marriage of the Lamb. Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb. Celebration belongs to God’s kingdom. God not only offers forgiveness, reconciliation and healing, but wants to lift up these gifts as a source of joy for all who witness them.

Jesus explains why he eats with sinners, because God rejoices and invites others to rejoice with him. “Rejoice with me,” the shepherd says, “I have found my sheep that was lost. “Rejoice with me, the woman of the lost coin says, “I have found the drachma I lost. Rejoice with me, the father-mother says, “This son of mine was lost and is found. All these voices are the voices of God. God does not want to keep joy alone. God wants everyone to share in it. God’s joy is the joy of angels and says, it is the joy of all who belong to the kingdom. The invitation is to all of us to join in. But as in Rembrandt’s painting, not all join in the joy. The elder stands tall and disapproving at the side of the painting. It is to him we turn next week. Let us pray...