

**Message Delivered at Christ Church**  
**Saturday & Sunday, March 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011**  
**The Big Read; Luke 15:1-32**  
**Delivered by Paul A. Johnson**

\*\*\*\*\*

*Our preparation for worship this day was the reading of Luke 15:1-10, the parables of the found sheep and found coin. The Parable of the Loving Father (aka the Prodigal Son) was read in its usual place, immediately before the message.*

If you are looking for something to read this Lent, I want to make a suggestion: it's called The Return of the Prodigal Son, and it's written by a man named Henri Nouwen.

Nouwen...who died fifteen years ago...was a Roman Catholic priest and university professor. Really, though, he's known as an author. He wrote over forty books on the Christian life. He was from the Netherlands, and was an aesthetically sensitive soul...one of those persons who appreciates beauty easily. In particular, he had an affection for works of art done by his Dutch countrymen; Rembrandt being one of them.

Now when I said that Nouwen was a priest and professor, I was giving you the sort of standard biographical intro. He was all those things, along with being exceptionally famous and revered; the kind of writer who gets invited to speak to thousands, and whose listeners hang on every word. His writing is great. I've read a half dozen of his books, and at least for me, his writing always speaks. He was capable of great grace, and was a true servant. On a grand scale, he gave voice to the oppressed peoples of the world who suffer injustice daily. On a more intimate level, there's a story of how when an earnest young man wrote him about his spiritual questions instead of just writing back and sharing more books to read he invited the young seeker to come live in his religious community for a month and offered to become the neophyte's spiritual director.

At the same time, there was much pain in his life. He had immense difficulty being connected with others. He acknowledged how dependent he became on the adulation and cheers and his need to be appreciated by others. He could be petty, and bear grudges. When a friend didn't compliment him enough or respond quickly enough to a letter, he could devolve into self-pity. Generosity and compassion came easily to Nouwen; but loneliness and disconnection, he admitted, ate away at him. Like the rest of us, he had clay feet, which often made his life dark.

He grew restless. He taught at Yale and Harvard. Then he took a couple of long retreats. He then moved to Peru, where he pastored an impoverished community in North Lima; and then finally ended up where he needed to be. While he was there, his sister-in-law back in Holland gave birth to a daughter with Down Syndrome. "Laura is going to be important to all of us in the family," he wrote his sister-in-law. She, "who will always be a child, will teach us the way of Christ as no one will ever be able to."

Whether the birth of Laura had a direct impact on what happened next for Nouwen is unclear; but he got connected with a group called L'Arche." That's French for "the Ark." L'Arche is an international ministry that provides care for those who suffer severe disabilities. Really, what they do is provide a home for these persons who cannot provide a home for themselves; and folks no more qualified than you, or me, or Henri Nouwen live in these homes as caregivers.

Nouwen asked for his bishop's permission to join a L'Arche community, and was granted it; eventually settling at a place called Daybreak in Toronto. And one day, when visiting in the office of one of the community administrators, his eyes fell upon a poster she had hanging on her wall of this: Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. (\*See the end of this text for a depiction of the painting.)

Where he was in his own life...where he had been...left him captivated by the image. He couldn't take his eyes off it. The original painting is in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia; and eventually, Nouwen had the chance to go see the painting in person. It's a big painting; life size; eight feet by six feet.

Now Rembrandt was near his death when he did this painting. It's one of his last works. He is, of course, one of the greatest painters to have ever lived. But his life was profligate, tragic, and sad; with much loss and much heartbreak. He drank too much; spent too much; and cared little for society's conventional boundaries when it came to love and relationships.

Only one of his children survived to adulthood. When his first wife, Saskia, died he took up with his son's nurse. That relationship ended in unfaithfulness and greed, with Rembrandt vengefully having the woman shut up in

an asylum for twelve years. He then took up with his maid. They never married, the consequences of which were borne much more heavily by her than by him.

He was a genius with the canvass, but a deeply flawed soul.

In 1668...the year before his own death, and after having suffered much grievous loss of what was dear to him, and that is exceptionally painful to talk about...he painted *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. It is the painting of an old man, who needed to live long enough to begin to be apprehended by the depth of the story.

It's not the only time he ever put the Prodigal Son to canvass. In 1635, when he was twenty-nine years old, he created this work. (\*See the end of this text for a depiction of this painting, also.) It's the prodigal in the midst of his license. That's a self-portrait of Rembrandt, and the woman is his wife Saskia. Bearing an eager visage, it is most certainly the portrait of an artist as a young man.

This painting...well, that's from one who's lived long enough to begin to see.

There are things in this painting that people who know art would point out to the rest of us...

...The cold rectitude of the elder son, off to the side. His back is so straight, you can almost smell the resentment.

...How the head of the younger son looks like that of a child. It's a bit smaller than it should be; there's no hair; and it even looks a little bit moist, the way the head of a child does when it comes out of its mother's womb.

...There are a couple of characters in the background, who do not look like farmhands. Rembrandt was following an artistic convention of his time to pair the story of the Loving Father with the story of the tax-collector and the Pharisee. That's the one where the tax-collector and the Pharisee are both in the temple praying. God rejects the prayer of the Pharisee because it's all about how good the Pharisee is. Instead, God justifies the tax-collector who's prayer is simply "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

...And the hands of the Father. Light shining on old hands. Weathered hands. There are hands made strong through the work they've done. And there are hands made strong through the life they've seen. The latter may be gnarled by arthritis and cracked and barely able to hold a pencil. Those are the hands in this picture; the kind of hands that have no time for "what ifs" and "what has been," but that only have time to gather in and celebrate what is...that the lost have been found, and the dead returned to life.

Scripturally, of course, the painting makes no sense. It doesn't follow the text. There was no tax-collector and Pharisee there when the younger son came home; and we've heard the story, and know that the elder son returns after the party has already begun.

That's not how Rembrandt portrays it; because he has made the story his own. Or maybe more accurately, like Nouwen brought his own story to this one. Which is, of course, what we all do with this one. We bring our stories to this story.

We do that, I think, because we all come from families; we know families. We easily bring our story to this story because we all have fathers to deal with, or mothers; or sons, or daughters; or sisters, or brothers, or someone else. Family relationships are primal, and last our entire lives. The relationships in this family are complicated. But most families are complicated. I've noticed this time reading Luke how often the stories by Jesus and about Jesus have to do with families...this story; the brother who asks Jesus to mediate a dispute over an inheritance; Mary and Martha; and Luke, you will remember, is the one who makes sure we know that John the Baptist and Jesus are related. Maybe that's because families are so powerful, and it's where we all begin, and where we so yearn for rightness.

We bring our story to this one because sometimes we identify with the prodigal; we all have days when we are like the younger child...incontinent; manipulative; when our desire to consume takes us away from home. We think we're special, and so deserve a little boundary-breaking; we use others to get what we want...which is the most problematic offense of the younger son. To ask for one's inheritance early is the equivalent of declaring to one's parent that we would prefer them to be dead; and it may be that his return—despite the speech he prepares—is motivated more by his desire for three squares a day than it is by remorse.

And all of us sometimes identify with the one who stayed home; we all have days when we are like the elder child...imprisoned by our own righteousness; keeping score; and justly outraged when someone cuts in line and the quid doesn't line up with the pro quo. The elder son's relationship with his father is completely contractual. He's the man's child, but says that he's worked like a slave. All his father has belongs to him as well, yet he complains that he's never even been given a goat to celebrate with his friends. Arms crossed, he does what he's supposed to with a

furrowed countenance. And now... "not only has this son of yours come home after squandering the whole thing, but he even gets a party!" It is manifestly unfair and outrageous.

It is.

Which is, of course, the point. This story isn't about the two sons. It's about the father. Unconstrained by conventional expectations of how a father is to behave, he abandons all dignity and races to greet the younger son who once wished him dead and simply has no time for the boy's well-contrived speech. "Robe, sandals, and ring," he mutters. "And yes, yes...we must have a party." His joy is so great he just can't fit it into propriety. This kid's been walking through hill and dale rehearsing his speech, and I love it how the father doesn't even let him finish it. There's just no time for that stuff when the lost are found and the dead come back to life!

And when the elder son stands outside, he abandons his dignity again, leaves the party and comes out to him, also; this time beseeching, and reminding the boy of the love he's always had for him; hoping that the child will join the party and recognize that the love he feels towards the one who's come back is what he's always felt towards the one who never left..."But son, we just have to party when the lost are found and the dead are given new life and the separated come home. Son, we've just got to celebrate!"

What is the father in this story like? Like a shepherd who will gladly leave behind the ninety-nine who know where they are to find the one who is lost; and then who throws a party. What is the father in this story like? Like a woman who turns her house upside down to find a coin that's lost, and then throws a party that probably costs more than the coin is worth to celebrate that she found it!

Actions that make no sense, but are crazy good! In their own way, both these children go away and shrink back and leave home, which is what we human beings tend to do. "No," says the father. "Come in. We must celebrate!"

Study the parable enough, and you'll hear people say that the elder son represents Israel and the younger son the Gentiles; which is probably true. Or that the elder son represents the Pharisees who are listening in, and the younger son the tax-collectors and other sinners who are doing the same thing; and that's probably true, also. Or that we are each sometimes the elder son, and each sometimes the younger son...which is what I have just suggested.

But what stays the same is the father...who keeps going out, who makes a home, and who throws a party for whomever comes back...who celebrates whenever the lost are found, and who makes it so that the dead can know new life. Because as outrageous as it sounds, that is exactly what the Kingdom of God is like...more outrageous and upside down than we can imagine. And that is today's news.

So we're all different souls here today; we're all bringing our own stuff to this worship service; we all got our baggage. We've got these signs out front during Lent. Someday, I'd like to put a sign out that says "Bring your baggage." Because we all got it, and this is where we can bring it. So don't know what kind of day it will be for you...maybe a younger child day, maybe an elder child day, maybe just a regular old day. But I've been talking for about fifteen minutes...about ten times longer than it takes to read the parable, itself...and here's what I want to say. Regardless of where you are today, Jesus told this parable so that you would hear it; and so that we would hear it. We get to come home. And also, we get the privilege of putting it all aside, and letting those with whom we are distant come home, too. Because that's what God does.

We're going to finish this morning by just listening to a song about coming home; and let the story sit for a bit. It doesn't take a genius to see that the story Jesus tells is incomplete...the elder son is still outside. After all, a good parable never puts a period at the end of the last sentence. That's our job. But I will point out to us that at the end of this story, it isn't just the elder child who is still outside. The father is still there with him. I think it's Jesus' way of saying to each of us..."I'll stay with you, but come home and join the party; it's thrown on your behalf." So we'll just listen, with the understanding that like the shepherd; and like the woman; and like the parent in this story...the response to the word God yearns for is "yes."

NOTE: A couple people asked me after worship what happened to Nouwen. It seems that in his work with L'Arche he found some of the peace he sought. Working in a community in which to those with whom he served he was simply "Henri" seemed to have made it more possible for him to simply be himself. The Return of the Prodigal Son was published in 1992. Nouwen died in 1996, while working on a television special about the painting. Just as it took Rembrandt a lifetime to be able to paint it, it took Nouwen a lifetime to appreciate it.

The song Missy and Keith sang at the end of worship is called "The Prodigal," and is from Eden's Bridge.

THE PAINTINGS:



