

4th Sunday of Lent “The Return of the Prodigal Son”

Fr. Frank Schuster

I am grateful for the Gospel reading this weekend because it gives me the opportunity to talk about a picture we have framed in our reconciliation room. It is a print of a painting by Rembrandt that makes its home in St. Petersburg, Russia. It is a stunning painting depicting the father’s embrace of his prodigal son. I invite you to take a look at it on your way out of church today if you would like. In the painting, you may recall that the prodigal son is on his knees with a disheveled look and a shaved head. He looks like a man who just returned from a concentration camp, a man who lost all individuality, like a man whose name had been replaced with a number. Meanwhile, we have the father whose presence is central to the painting. There is a luminosity that comes forth from the father encompassing his lost son. The father’s face suggests he is a blind man, blind in his love for his wayward son. Meanwhile, there are three men in the background that are looking on with a sense of disbelief. One of these men is the elder brother.

Fr. Henri Nouwen wrote a wonderful book entitled, “The return of the prodigal son”. During a particularly bleak time in his life, he had the chance to see a poster of Rembrandt’s painting. The painting captivated him because of the tenderness the father demonstrates in his loving embrace of his long lost son. Nouwen even made a trip to St. Petersburg so that he could spend some time meditating on the original painting on display at an art gallery there.

During his meditations on Rembrandt’s work, Nouwen initially identified himself with the lost son. I believe we all do this, yes? The story of the prodigal son is a parable after all. During his ministry, the Lord accentuated our need for repentance. Humanity has a whole can be compared with the lost son, squandering our divine inheritance, misusing the gifts God has given us as a race on unholy activities. One would only need to open the newspaper or turn on the television to count the ways. Through conversion, humanity can return to the father in humility and repentance. What reception could we expect from our Father in heaven? Jesus seems to be suggesting, a warm embrace and what might be described as blind love. If we stay at this level of contemplation, our time would have been well spent. Nouwen suggests much deeper levels of meaning to this parable.

At the beginning of the story, the prodigal son asks for his father’s inheritance. To better understand the implications of this request, Nouwen quotes the work of Kenneth Baily, who wrote, “For over fifteen years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son’s request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has always been emphatically the same...the conversation runs as follows. Has anyone ever made such a request in your village? Never! Could anyone ever make such a request? Impossible! If anyone did, what would happen? The father would beat him, of course! Why? The request means – he wants his father to die.”

The son's request signifies his desire to be completely cut off from his family name, from his home, and from his present identity. In place of the identity given to him at his birth, he wants to define his own identity by following his appetites. He exchanges the unconditional love of his father for the very conditional love of the world around him. The father says, "I love you unconditionally". The world says, "I love you IF you are good looking, I love you IF you are intelligent and I love you IF you are wealthy. I love you IF you produce much, sell much and buy much. I love you IF you submit to the indoctrination of woke culture even when it is contrary to the Gospel." Because we can never ultimately measure up to the world's IF's, the world's conditional expectations, Nouwen writes, "As long as I keep looking for my true self in the world of conditional love, I will remain "hooked" to the world – trying, failing, and trying again. It is a world that fosters addictions because what it offers cannot satisfy the deepest craving of my heart." Addictions like accumulation of wealth and power, attainment of status and admiration, lavish consumption of food and drink, and sexual gratification without distinguishing between lust and love. Nouwen writes, "As long as we live within the world's delusions, our addictions condemn us to futile quests in 'the distant country'". We have wandered away from our Father's home, much like the son who departed from his father's home in a false search for individuality. The son comes home to the father emaciated and disheveled. He has a shaved head that ironically signifies his loss of his individuality, shredded by the demands of popular culture.

Lent is a great time to ask ourselves, how are we like the prodigal son? Nouwen suggests however something rather profound. What if we are more like the elder son than his younger brother? I'll use myself as an example. I can say that I have been a rather obedient son to my father and mother. I am a law-abiding citizen, although, I may have gotten a speeding ticket or two or three. I am not someone who cursed my parents and headed off for a life of debauchery. That isn't me. But I might be more like the elder brother in this story. And I think many of us can probably feel the same way. If we have ever held a grudge against someone or have found ourselves being overly judgmental or critical of others, perhaps upon reflection we can see ourselves more like the elder brother who is critical of his father's affection toward his younger brother. The parable invites us to ask ourselves, how are we like the elder brother, to a family member, a coworker, to those on the peripheries of society, or maybe even towards a public person? How often do we harbor grudges, judgmental of the father's love and forgiveness?

Lent is a great time to ask ourselves, how are we like the elder brother? Nouwen suggests, however, even something more profound. Whether or not we can identify better with the prodigal son or the elder brother, we are all called to embrace our vocation as Christians to be the father who embraces his wayward son. We are challenged to identify with the father, who although wounded by the sins of his son, pines for his son to return. He is hurt by the sins of one so close, but rather than holding a grudge, he prays rather for his conversion. Although the forgiveness cannot happen until the loved one comes home, the father nevertheless prays for that day, each and every day. When the son returns, it is like Easter morning, "my son was dead and now he is alive. Thanks be to God." If there was to be a test question at this point, I suppose we can ask ourselves, when we are hurt by the actions of others, do we a) harbor a grudge, pass judgement or b) pray for true

reconciliation and healing, no matter how long we may have to wait? If you have answered correctly, you understand our vocation to imitate the father of this story.

I hope by now that you agree with me that the parable of the prodigal son is extremely rich with meaning. I therefore invite us to take time this week and pray with Luke chapter 15 and ask ourselves, who are we in this story? How are we like the sinful wayward son? How are we like the elder brother? How are we like the forgiving father? Once we have meditated on these questions, we may then be prepared to ask the ultimate question this parable poses as we journey closer to Holy Week, namely, what does this story say about Jesus' longing for us?