

LENTEN REFLECTION: WEEK #6 (HOLY WEEK)

So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began. (Luke 15: 20-24)



As we now begin holy week, we come to the final reflection on Rembrandt's painting above and Henri Nouwen's book The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming. As we noted, Nouwen begins his reflection on the painting by identifying with the prodigal son and only later comes to the realization that he is more like the elder son. According to Nouwen, however, the deeper meaning of the painting was not unlocked for him until he turned his attention onto the third and final major character of the parable, the father. While in the midst of a particularly difficult period of his life, a member of his community sternly rebuked Nouwen for wallowing in self-pity and told him, that as pastor of the community, they needed a father. This exchange led Nouwen to recognize that the theme of the parable is not really about conversion and reconciliation but rather about mercy and forgiveness. While he may have acted like either the younger or older son at different times in his life, Nouwen comes to understand that he is actually called to become the father. Nouwen discovers that the mercy and compassion of the father in the parable is not only an indication of how God the Father acts towards humanity but also is the way he is expected to behave as a Christian with those people in his life. Nouwen concludes his series of meditations on the parable by suggesting that the message of the passage is that we are all called to be the forgiving father in our own lives, ready to extend a welcoming hand to anyone who may have hurt us. This message about forgiveness is especially poignant in this holy week. God demonstrated his great love for us by offering his only begotten Son so that we might return home as well. So as we reflect this week on the suffering and death of Jesus for our sakes over the next few days, let us remember that we too are invited to go the extra mile as Jesus did by dying for us on the cross and to be as forgiving as God the Father.

For Personal Reflection

While it is generally called the parable of the prodigal son, Henri Nouwen suggests that it is a misnomer. The focus of the parable is not so much on the misbehaviour of the son as it is on the love and compassion of the father. Therefore, Nouwen would rather title this scripture passage as the “Parable of the Merciful Father.”

- Would you have been able to be as forgiving as the father was to his son?
- What are your reactions to Nouwen’s suggestion that we are called to be as forgiving as God the Father?
- Who do you find it difficult to forgive in your life?



But Rembrandt, who showed me the Father in utmost vulnerability, made me come to the awareness that my final vocation is indeed to become like the Father and to live out his divine compassion in my daily life. Though I am both the younger son and elder son, I am not to remain them, but to become the Father. (p.121)

But how does it feel to say: “The father is like me”? Do I want to be like the father? Do I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home but also the one who welcomes home; not just the one who receives compassion, but the one who offers it as well? (p. 122)

Indeed as son and heir I am to become successor. I am destined to step into my Father’s place and offer to others the same compassion that he has offered me. The return to the Father is ultimately the challenge to become the Father. (p.123)

Then both sons in me can gradually be transformed into the compassionate father. This transformation leads me to the fulfillment of the deepest desire of my restless heart. Because what greater joy can there be for me than to stretch out my tired arms and let my hands rest in a blessing on the shoulders of my home-coming children. (p. 133)

CLOSING PRAYER

Merciful God, you so loved the world that you sent Jesus to save us.
By his life and death on the cross, he revealed the depth of your love for us.
Have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to the joy of his resurrection.
But always help us remember Lord that the measure that you have forgiven us
is the measure by which we are to forgive others. Help us to be your forgiveness in the
world. This we ask through Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. Amen.

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