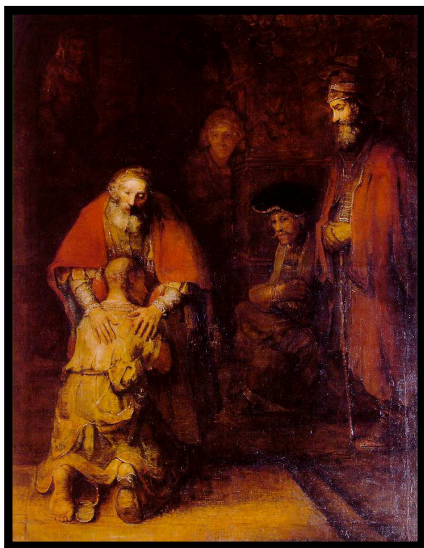


cLent 4 ~ March 14, 2010 ~ A homily preached by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell at Old St. Andrew's Church, Bloomfield, CT

Joshua 5. 9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5.16-21; Luke 15.1-3, 11b-32



French theologian and Roman Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen, visited The Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia about 20 years ago. He went because he had encountered a poster of Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son* at a university office in Paris—the same poster that now hangs in my office here at Old St. Andrew's.

Nouwen was compelled to immerse himself in the painting because Luke's story of this parable and Rembrandt's depiction of it gripped him so completely.

As a brief side-bar, the first day Nouwen sat on the bench at The Hermitage to observe the Master's masterpiece, he was quickly whisked away after a mere five minutes. Russian authorities did not allow anybody to loiter near this valuable artwork. That kind of behavior raised unacceptable suspicions.

Nouwen protested to no avail. Eventually, however, his persistence paid off and he got a meeting with the Museum Director. He pleaded his case as a scholar and received a special, one day permission to sit on a bench in front of the famous painting all morning and all afternoon. This story is chronicled at the beginning of Nouwen's beautiful treatise *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*.

Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn created the 8½' X 6¾' painting in 1666. In it, he captures the very spirit of Jesus' story about a man and his two sons, one younger and one older. We've just heard the story and I commend Rembrandt's painting to you. I also recommend Nouwen's excellent book.

So, what do this parable and painting say to us? The story is so straight forward, a story of betrayal and return, right? Yes, on the surface that's exactly right. The boy begs for his inheritance while his father is still alive, then abandons his father, squanders the money, feels remorse in his empty belly, and returns seeking forgiveness.

As with all of Jesus' parables, the listeners—you and I—are drawn into the story. In fact, the way Jesus' parables work is that each listener plays each role—in this case, father, prodigal son, and elder son.

When you hear this tale, do you ask yourself, what you would do as the young man? Of course, you do but you, unlike the boy, would never have petitioned for your inheritance with your old man still alive and well, would you? Maybe that's why a lot of people don't like the kid. He's not like you. But, you still step into his shoes when you hear the parable, right?

Or, how would you as Dad treat the boy? First, would you give him nothing, a nickel, or the whole nugget? And, how might you react to seeing him wandering back across the south forty, broke as a bum? Party? No party?

Likewise, I'll bet a nickel that there are few sitting here who don't side in some significant measure with the good, loyal, hard working, caring, thoughtful, kind, helpful, obedient, not-quite-as-good-looking, older son. He's done everything right and nothing wrong. To quote him, "yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends..." You notice, don't you, that he's so furious he refers to this misfit as "your son," not my brother. Do you feel what I'm saying?

Jesus is brilliant. Man, would I like to have sat around the camp fire with him and listened to his stories, teachings, and parables. To think that after hearing this incredible, short story, I need to have a conversation with myself in three parts.

The usual exegesis of the prodigal is pretty straight forward. The lessons, however, are monumental. The father, as expected, represents God, the heavenly Father, always forgiving. His sons? There is the self-absorbed, selfish, and materialist son and then the son who's life makes sense on a larger scale.

I'm going to skip over the father figure. I think we're probably pretty much together about his character, although we may disagree about throwing the big party. We'll touch back on him when we're done with the boys.

The self-absorbed, selfish, and materialistic son? This is the elder son, the one owned by the farm, profits, the gift of a young goat, his father's approval. He's rigid and cock-sure. Everything is black and white and he knows which is which and which is right. He won't risk anything because he's so afraid of losing the security, position, and possessions that own him.

The son who's life makes sense on a larger scale is the prodigal. Yes, he screws up. And, by so doing, he grows and changes and learns. He turns around and comes to experience his humanity beyond Self. Imagine the lessons of that hungry belly, pigs eating better than he is, his yearning for forgiveness and the opportunity to love and be loved again.

I know there are skeptics among you about my take on the parable. But remember, I'm not taking sides. Jesus didn't take sides. He just told the story. He leaves the rest up to us. How do we feel as elder son, prodigal, parent? Which parts of each of us have "*been there*" with each of these characters?

Because I said we would touch back with the father, let me summarize. Jesus' theology is radically inclusive. God creates us and God always loves what God creates. That love extends to us when we stay home because we have a certain vision of what that means *and* that love extends to us when we stray from home. God's grace—God's ever present generosity of spirit—extends to us when we get mad at Dad—"*Where's my young goat*"—and when we say, "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.*"

Jesus simply insists: *We are loved! and we should do the same.*

Amen.

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