

## THE PRODIGAL SON (Lk 15:1-32)

A Sunday School teacher had been discussing the Parable of the Prodigal Son with her class and asked them, "Who was sorry to see the prodigal son come home?" Immediately, one little boy said, "The fatted calf."

There is a wonderful book entitled **The Return of the Prodigal Son** by Henri Nouwen that takes the reader on an interior journey to experience how we each are like all three of the persons in the parable, not only the prodigal son, but also the elder son and called to be the compassionate father. Henri bases his meditations on the painting by Rembrandt which depicts an aged, obviously wealthy man embracing a young man in tattered clothing who is kneeling in front of him with his head on the old man's midsection. Standing nearby is a stern looking wealthy man just observing the scene. Henri spent hours in front of the original painting which is in the Hermitage Museum in Russia and then many more hours studying a poster of the famous painting. The book provides a wonderful Lenten reflection on our need to return with our whole hearts to the Lord and how we are called to be as compassionate with others as the Lord is with us.

Open arms, but with trepidation in my heart that we would be used and my love cast aside --- that was how I greeted my son when he came to live with us at the age of 25. He was my prodigal son. Stephen was a gifted person who threw it all away on alcohol, drugs and other addictions. He nearly died or was killed several times in his wanderings through life. And the sorrow and pain I held in my heart for him through those years was terrible. I had loved him the best I knew how when he was growing up, but he chose a different way and I couldn't force him to choose my way. He had to live his own life. But then he chose to try to take his own life one final time and reached the bottom of his despair, finally reaching out to us for help. Mary and I have learned that we never know what life is going to throw at us, but it will always challenge us to love, for you see we heard of his suicide attempt when we were on our honeymoon. Stephen had been searching for love and for life in all the wrong places. And even though they promised happiness and satisfaction, they were illusions, nothing but empty promises. So we took him in and "killed the fatted calf." Mary described Stephen as a shell of a man when he came to live with us, a big wall on the outside and nothing on the inside, ready to fall apart at the slightest breath blowing in the wrong direction. To make a long story short, we filled him with our love for two years and built him back up into a fully alive human being, before he was killed in a traffic accident. The last thing I remember of Stephen was his great big smile, waving to us as we passed by him as he was going to buy lottery tickets. Thirteen years later I still remember in the very fiber of my being his arms clasped tightly around me in a

big hug on Easter Sunday telling me how much he loved me and thanking me for what we had done for him. Without knowing it, that was his goodbye to me. The father runs out to meet his prodigal son and throws his arms around him, and we can picture in our minds the beauty of that scene. And "in the context of that compassionate embrace, our brokenness can appear to be beautiful, but our brokenness has no other beauty but the beauty that comes from the compassion that surrounds it" (p. 35). Compassion transforms death into life. It is when we recognize our brokenness and sinfulness that we can turn back to God. The 12-step programs for alcoholics, for drug addicts, for sex addicts, for food addicts are all based on that common wisdom. God created us "very good" and we cannot change that; we must come to see it and believe it! Not easy to do at all, but as St. Paul says, ..."where our failings are great, grace is always greater." "One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness." While God wants to restore me to the full dignity of sonship, I keep insisting that I will settle for being a hired servant, and continue clinging to my sins --- those things which keep me separated from total, unconditional love which would transform me into a new person. I have seen what that love can do for a person with the transformation that took place with my son, so I know the power of love, not the love the world promises but the all-giving, self-sacrificing love which comes from God.

We are all called to become the compassionate father for others, the hands and heart of Christ in this world. My journey is not over when I, as the prodigal son, am forgiven. God fills me with His mercy and compassion when I return to Him, and then calls me to go out and give that same mercy and compassion to others. I am to become like God, like Jesus Christ, forgiving those who have wronged me. Yet so often I stand aloof like the elder son, resentful of the love being shown to others or needed by others, somehow thinking that if I love them, I myself will be loved less. That competing for love and comparing ourselves to the love of others is useless and a waste of time and energy. God does not compare, but we struggle to understand how everyone could be His favorite. As Henri Nouwen puts it though, "our emotional problems would melt as snow in the sun if we could let the truth of God's non-comparing love permeate our heart." When dealing with others, we are called to look with the eyes of an all giving and forgiving Father rather than with the eyes of our own low self-esteem. The parable never tells us what the elder son decides, whether he joins the party or not. That decision is left up to us each time we are faced with the decision to forgive. Will we embrace our brother or sister as we have been embraced or will we stand and condemn?

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