

A Story of Homecoming

Luke 15:11-52

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

March 21, 2021

Henri Nouwen was burned out. Acclaimed author, widely sought-after speaker, popular professor first at Notre Dame, then Yale, then Harvard, he was no longer sure of his vocation, his calling as a Catholic priest.

On his return from a trip to troubled Central America, he had written a book describing his experiences and traveled the country speaking, bearing witness to the injustices he had seen.

Exhausted, Nouwen went to Europe to spend time with friends as he tried to figure out what to do with the remainder of his career. Specifically, he needed time and distance to consider an opportunity as unlike his academic and literary career as anyone could imagine – becoming the parish priest in a small Canadian community made up entirely of mentally challenged adults and their caregivers. It was one of 90 such communities – named L’Arch (the Ark) – around the world. (My son Jonathan spent two years working in a L’Arch community in Washington, D.C. Some of you will remember him from his childhood at Lake Shore.)

Nouwen later confessed, “I had never given much thought to people with a mental handicap. I had learned how to give lectures and write books, how to explain things systematically, how to make titles and subtitles, how to argue and how to analyze. I had little idea as to how to communicate with men and women who hardly speak and, if they do speak, are not interested in logical arguments or well-reasoned opinion.”

One day – a day that changed Nouwen’s life – he and a friend visited the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, where he saw Rembrandt’s painting of the Prodigal Son. He had seen a poster of a portion of 6x8 foot painting, and it had a powerful effect on him. “It makes me want to laugh and cry at the same time,” he told a friend. “It touches me deeply.” But he had never seen the masterpiece itself.

Nouwen sat mesmerized before the painting for four hours that day. He returned the next day.

His fascination with the painting continued when he returned to America. He bought a print for his office. Ultimately, he credited Rembrandt’s “Prodigal” and more importantly the story behind the painting with helping him make what was perhaps the biggest decision of his life.

Jesus’ story is as much a masterpiece as Rembrandt’s painting is.

“There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So, he divided his property between them.”

Jesus does not give us an insight into the young man’s motivation. Nor does he suggest that the father was upset with his son’s request or that he was disappointed or angry with his son. Amy-Jill Levine, the Jewish New Testament scholar, points out that the younger son’s decision wasn’t a violation of Jewish law; it just wasn’t very smart.

“A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country,” which is to say to a Gentile country, or at least to a farm owned by a Gentile.

We know that because later the young man got a job tending pigs, which was expressly forbidden to Jews.

“And there he squandered his property in dissolute living.” What is interesting is that Jesus tells the part about the profligacy of the young man in seven words, seven words out of forty-one verses: *“he squandered his property in dissolute living.”* Jesus wasn’t interested in the salacious details. He was more interested in the young’s man response to the calamity he had brought on himself.

The young man could not have *“squandered his property”* at a worse time. A famine began devastating the land. Like many impoverished people – for he was now among their ranks -- the young man became hungry to the point of starving. In desperation *“he hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating,”* but evidently the farmer wouldn’t allow it.

There are people who prosper in hard times, as we well know. In a famine it’s the people who can still grow food. People were starving, and the farmer raised pigs. Pork bellies went through the roof.

“And this young hired hand wants me to give him the feed I have for my prized pigs? No way,” the farmer thought. His pigs were worth more to him than the young hired hand’s life was.

That is when the young man *“came to himself.”* Destitute, utterly vulnerable, filthy from feeding pigs, his stomach aching from hunger -- that was the self he came to. It was a brutal, devastating, self-realization.

A contemporary story.

Last Monday, while visiting with one of our sons and his fiancé in Pennsylvania, we met Lee, who had become their housemate around the time the pandemic struck. He is tall, clean-cut. He has an easy way about him. A budding writer. He and our son, Francois, became best friends.

But as the weeks passed, Francois and Alexa began to sense that something was wrong. There were signs that caused concern. While he was out one day, they did what many friends and family members have felt compelled to do – they went through the trash in Lee’s room – and discovered what they feared: Lee was a heroin addict.

They did not ask him to leave. Instead, they confronted him with what they knew. And they insisted on telling his mother what was going on. Her first response: it had happened so many times before, she said, that she had no more tears to cry. There were no friends to call; they had bailed on him when they saw what was happening to him.

It was a coming to himself moment for Lee, but it was more than that. It was a coming to the realization that he didn’t have to be the self he had become. Francois told Lee over and over, “I know you. This isn’t you.”

It was a hard time for everyone. There were a couple of relapses. Francois said, “Lee took all the love in his life – his mom’s, his friends’ – and put it in a needle and stuck in his arm.”

In the middle of it all, Page, a girl friend he hadn’t seen in ten years, came back into his life. She said she had never stopped loving him.

With the support of his family, Page, Francois and Alexa, and plenty of professional help, Lee dug himself out of a deep dark hole. Tuesday, the day after we

met him, Lee, who had been clean for nine months, and Page loaded their car and began a cross-country drive to a new, hopefully clean life in San Francisco.

I tell that story because I needed to put a name and a face on the nameless, faceless prodigal in Jesus' story. And because I want us to sense the shame and the humiliation he must have felt the day he *"came to himself."*

Seeing himself with honest eyes, he thought, *"How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am not worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired hands.'"*

The depth of his devastation is revealed in his words: *"I am not worthy to be called your son."* The young man thought that, as a consequence of his having squandered his inheritance, he had lost his worth, his place as a son. That misconception was blown away when his father met him in the field, threw his arms around him, kissed him and welcomed him home.

There is a story in a medieval Jewish writing that sounds a lot like Jesus' parable; it offers a subtle but moving touch.

A king had a son who had gone astray from his father on a journey of a hundred days. His friends said to him, "Return to your father." He said, "I cannot." Then his father sent word (to him), "Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to you."

"Bring out a robe." the father said in Jesus' parable, *"the best one, and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" And they began to celebrate.*

A robe and sandals? Artists pick up on details like that.

In Rembrandt's painting the father is not the robust farmer we might imagine him to be, standing in his field waiting for his son to return; he is elderly, gray bearded, slightly bent over and, perhaps, blind. He is wearing a red robe, as is the older brother who stands to the side. We see the younger son from behind. He is on his knees; his face is buried in his father's robe. His clothes are filthy. We see his heel through a hole in one sandal. The other sandal has fallen off.

"Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet."

Meanwhile, outside, the older brother *"heard music and dancing."* He was not happy with the reception his father gave to his wayward little brother. Unlike his younger brother, he did not come to himself. There was no new self-awareness. He just doubled down on his old way of understanding himself and who he was in relationship to his father and brother, which was basically a transactional model.

"We had a deal. Each of us would get a share. He asked for his share. He got his share. He threw it away. That's it. He has no place here."

The father said, in essence, "Son, this is not a zero sum game. Your brother's return hasn't hurt you in any way. You still have your share in my inheritance. Besides, all I have is yours. Always has been."

The older brother had his father's blessing all along. But while his brother was free to leave, free to risk, free to fail, he had to stay and be the good son, the good boy. He had to stay and earn what was already his. You hear it in his words to his father: "*All these years I have worked like a slave for you.*" "*All these years I have worked . . .*" He never understood that blessing is given, not earned. Accepted in humility and gratitude, not in satisfaction and pride. The older brother was blessed all along, but he didn't know it.

And when the story ends, he still doesn't know it.

The parable of the Prodigal Son has two endings. In one, the wayward son is graciously restored to the family; there is joy, there is dancing and singing. In the other – picture the scene: the older brother is standing outside, by himself, alone in his anger and bitterness.

The worst part – it is details like this that show that Jesus was a master storyteller – is that the older brother, alone outside, can hear the music. That is a deft touch. There is a party going on, a celebration; there's healing happening, restoration of a broken relationship. He can hear it. He can't escape it. It rings in his ears. But it does not bring joy to his heart.

Henri Nouwen's book, The Return of the Prodigal Son, is, at one level, the story of a man's encounter with a painting. At a deeper level, it is the story of a man's encounter with the story behind the painting through the painting. The subtitle of the book is A Story of Homecoming. The Prodigal, both in Jesus' story and Rembrandt's painting, was Henri Nouwen's story of coming to himself, his authentic self, coming home to his true calling, his true vocation in life.

In 1985, Nouwen resigned his position at Harvard and after a year in France, moved to Toronto where he became the parish priest in the Daybreak l'Arch community, a position he held until his death eleven years later.

Most of us have been around long enough that we have come to ourselves – been compelled by life or circumstances to face our weaknesses, limitations, short-sightedness, narrow-mindedness, insecurities, selfishness, prejudices, which is to say, our humanity and our baked-in sinfulness -- many times over. If we were fortunate, our coming to ourselves became a coming home to the self we were created to be.

Speaking theologically, that is being saved by grace, not of works lest anyone should brag about it.

May God grant that we might not only believe in and be the beneficiaries of a Gospel of grace, but that we might extend that gracious Good News to the prodigals and the older brothers and sisters, and mothers and fathers, and all those whose lives we share.

May God so grant. Amen.