

“THE WAITING FATHER”

Luke 15:11-32

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In his book about this parable, writer and theologian Henri Nouwen tells about his repeated visits to the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg to see Rembrandt's famous painting. He noticed that though the painting's title is "The Return of the Prodigal Son," the museum guides almost all described it as a picture of a compassionate father. That really resonated with Nouwen. The parable, he says, is really the story of the father's love.

He goes on to reflect further on Rembrandt's portrayal of the father: what gives it "such an irresistible power, he says, is that the most divine is captured in the most human." (p. 93). I encourage you to look up the painting sometime, and study it; you'll see what Nouwen means. The father in the picture is old; his hands are wrinkled; his face is lined with worry. You can tell that he has suffered grief.

This is true to the parable, and a big part of what makes it such a powerful story. Nothing about this story is simple or easy – least of all the father's role. We see that he is a loving parent, we see the forgiveness, but we sometimes overlook just how much this cost him.

The cost was not only to his wealth, but to his pride and dignity. He absorbed the hurt of rejection and ingratitude, grieved his son's absence, lived in fear for him. And he chose the hard wisdom of love: undoubtedly from the beginning he wanted to hold his son close, protect him, steer him in the right direction. But love doesn't do that. Love knows it can't force, constrain, push, or pull. It offers the freedom to reject that love or to love in return." (p. 95)

To be free to love includes the possibility of leaving home, leaving the place of love and belonging, going far afield, losing everything, and causing pain. This is the love the prodigal's father had for him. This is the love God has for us. God is willing, like the father in Jesus' story, to bear the pain of this kind of love. There's a certain vulnerability here that we aren't accustomed to thinking about in connection with God.

God doesn't have to be like this. But this is what God chooses. Nouwen says about the father in the story, "the only authority he claims for himself is the authority of compassion." (p. 95)

Jesus describes the father seeing his son returning 'while he was still far away' – I wonder, was he watching for him, perhaps looking out the window many times each day, hoping against hope that his child might return? – and then running out to meet him, to embrace him. This is a picture of God – but it's not always the one we carry around with us. We often think of God as keeping score, staying distant, playing hard to get, demanding that we earn our place. Nothing could be further from Jesus' God: God is waiting with arms open in merciful blessing.

It's worth noting that in the parable Jesus also has the father going out to meet his other son, the one who's been dutifully, if not very happily, slaving away in the family business and is less than pleased about the return of his wayward brother. Like his brother, he has failed to understand what it means that his father loves him. He can only see that his brother is, in his view, less deserving of that love.

From the father's point of view, there is no comparing of the two sons. He loves each one for himself. His love isn't measured out according to good behavior, or accomplishments, or talents. But his son can't see that. We often can't see that.

We compare – our world ranks each of us more or less intelligent, successful, attractive. We are used to grades, scores, statistics, rankings. We constantly measure ourselves against others. This wastes a lot of time and energy, and leads, oftener than not, to resentment and feelings of inadequacy.

The father can't force either son to accept his love, or for that matter to love each other. But his heart goes out to both of them. He longs to have them together with him as siblings at the same table. But that can only happen when each of them learns to see himself – as well as his sibling - as a beloved part of the family.

Nouwen says: "The great call to conversion [is] to look not with the eyes of my own low self-esteem, but with the eyes of God's love." (p. 105)

When the father runs out to meet and hug his returning son, he doesn't even really give him a chance to finish apologizing. He doesn't ask the questions we would want to ask: where have you been? Why did you do this? What happened to the money? No, it is all about – it's *just* about – welcoming home a beloved child. And there's no hesitation about what comes next: it has to be a celebration. We know that the father could have chosen a different response. We could understand if he did. We appreciate that there has been a whole lot of hurt and betrayal and disappointment leading up to this moment. But the father's love chooses joy. We find ourselves hoping that the brothers will make that same choice.

When we hear this parable, many of us identify with the son we call "the prodigal," in his lostness if not in the wild, destructive, and irresponsible life he's lived. Others of us can identify with the elder son's self-righteous resentfulness. A lot of us, I bet, can identify a little bit with both of them.

But probably it hasn't occurred to most of us to identify with the father. Perhaps if we have been in the position of being hurt by the betrayal of a loved one, we can relate to how much the father has suffered. But it's pretty hard for us to relate to the unconditional love, the deep compassion, the unquestioning mercy, isn't it? Plus, of course, we know that the parental love in this parable represents the nature of God, so we know without a doubt that we are more like the wandering or resentful children.

But... isn't godliness the goal of the spiritual life? Isn't becoming like Jesus the whole point of following him? Isn't transformation what faith is supposed to lead to?

Henri Nouwen wonders if the real question we ask ourselves about the parable shouldn't be "are you interested in being like the father?" That is a hard question. We can see that the father's kind of love is not easy. It's self-giving, vulnerable, long-suffering; it's not grasping or controlling.

Jesus said, "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." (Luke 6:36)
That's a big stretch for us.

Uncomfortable though it may be to see ourselves in either of the rather ungrateful sons in this parable, that might still be easier than the call to be like the father, because becoming like the father means we have to "grow up."

Being like the father means gaining a certain spiritual maturity that makes one able to exercise the "authority of compassion" rather than the "authority of power." Able to accept and live with grief, because there is "no compassion without tears." To be merciful. To love generously and undemandingly. To forgive. To accept the responsibility of blessing others.

I think oftentimes we would prefer not to gain that kind of spiritual maturity. We don't want to give up competing and comparing. We like to think of our faith and our church in terms of what we "get out of it." We want love without the downside, without bearing the hurt and the grief, without the risk or the vulnerability. We feel strongly about what people deserve or don't deserve. Our own needs (and wants) are uppermost in our minds. We'd rather let someone else act, or speak, or lead. We don't see ourselves as capable of blessing others, let alone responsible to do so.

But it seems to me that in these days the need for Christians to gain spiritual maturity is great. Our world is desperately in need of compassion. Who is going to bring that compassion into the world if we don't? The world needs people who don't turn away or distract themselves from pain and grief and brokenness, people willing to see it and bear it and try to heal it. Isn't that what Jesus did? The world needs people who care as much about their responsibilities as their rights, and as much about the rights of others as about their own. Isn't that how Jesus would have us be? The world needs people who believe in the power of love. Aren't we those people?

There are things we want to be doing right now, but we need the capacity to value the safety of others more highly than our own wants. Those of us with relatively more privilege, voice, power, and resources need to become willing give some of that up - maybe a lot of it - for the sake of our sisters and brothers. In this time when many of us feel isolated and the usual things that help us feel connected are absent, we need to redouble our commitment to community, to church, to relationships - even if we have to find new ways to do that, even if means we have to extend ourselves more than we ever have before. In this time when we are feeling so much anxiety, we have to consciously choose patience, unselfishness, and trust.

We need to love people while holding on to them gently, allowing them to be who they are. We need to be less concerned with what people “deserve” and more concerned with what they need, because boy, there are a lot of needs right now. We need to choose forgiveness and healing over pride and resentment. We need to value human lives more than money. We need to earnestly desire – and work at making – a place at the table for everyone.

And we need to give up the childish assumption that someone else will do these things, or make them happen for us. WE are the ones Jesus has called to follow him on the path of mercy. WE are the ones he asks to be compassionate as the Father is compassionate.

Becoming like God isn't just an important part of Jesus' call to us; it's really the essence of it. It seems crazy and impossible. But it begins as we hear the call to be sons and daughters of God.

“When we belong to God, who loves us without conditions, we can live as he does. The great conversion called for by Jesus is to move from belonging to the world to belonging to God.” (p. 125)

Belonging to God, understanding ourselves as part of God's family, is the beginning of growing into that family resemblance, owning and living the values of the kingdom, developing the spiritual maturity that we call Christlikeness. And as arduous and challenging as that path can be, it's also an invitation ... to truly share the joy of God who welcomes each of us and all of us with open arms, a huge party, and unconditional love that heals and restores.

Resources:

Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*