

The Womb of Forgiveness

Luke 15:1-3;11b-32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Whitefish UMC

Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2010

- † Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is the nickname in Spanish for Francisco. There is a joke common in Madrid about a father who came to the city and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* that said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA.
- † On the appointed Tuesday, a squadron of the Civil Guard had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement. Although it's a joke about the commonality of the name "Paco," can we not hear it as a statement about the universal desire and need for forgiveness as well?
- † On this day, is there even one of us who cannot think of someone in our lives we really wish would forgive us or whom we really wish we could forgive? There is so much freedom in letting go of the emotions of guilt or anger, and when we're stuck in that place where forgiveness has not happened, we are enslaved by those same feelings.
- † The story of the prodigal, perhaps the most familiar and beloved of Jesus' parables, follows immediately after his parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Jesus has been accused by the religious authorities as being one who "welcomes and even eats with sinners (for example, prostitutes, tax

collectors, and unclean types). So Jesus begins his wondrously crafted story with:

- † “There was a man who had two sons.” You know the rest by heart, don’t you? It’s a treasure trove of sin and redemption, of grace and refusal of grace—and you can hear it from several different perspectives—the father, the younger son, the elder brother. Over the years, preachers have tried to bring new life to what some think is an overly familiar story—a bit like the *Velveteen Rabbit*—rubbed hairless by too much interpretation.
- † One pastor is alleged to have given a sixteen-week sermon series on the parable of the prodigal; after the sixteenth sermon a woman greeted the pastor at the door of the church and said, “I sure am sorry that poor boy ever ran away from home!” My goal today is to have you love and not hate this story—to be disturbed and also refreshed by it.
- † To do that, I’d like to paint a picture—but I’ll spare you that and offer instead the last finished great work of the Dutch master, Rembrandt. It is titled “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” I first saw a color plate of this painting in a French Jerusalem Bible in the seminary library. I was looking for it so I could read the scripture in French for a Taize service, where the scriptures are read together in many languages.
- † The image was so striking that I remember a sharp intake of my breath when I opened to the reproduction of the painting. Not too long after, a friend gave me a copy of a book by Henri Nouwen, the great spiritual writer, who had also been breathtakingly inspired by the painting. His book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, was written shortly after he gave up a stellar academic career to serve as pastor to severely disabled adults in a community in Toronto called Daybreak.

- † Nouwen first saw Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal on a poster in someone's office. Longing to delve more deeply into its mysteries, Nouwen journeyed to Russia, where the original painting is displayed in the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg. Because of his reputation as a scholar and teacher, Nouwen was granted unusual access to the painting, which is over eight feet tall and full of many details that we can't see in our slide on the screen.
- † Like many of Rembrandt's paintings, the Prodigal has two distinct areas—one of light and the other darkness. That distinction places the subjects in the same picture but in very different space. The son is bathed in the most light, which seems to emanate from the father. The darkness reveals four figures, one of which we can barely see.
- † The placement of the figures in dark and light raises the first question for us, as it did for Henri Nouwen. Jesus' parable calls for us to see ourselves in the story. Where do you find yourself? We are all in the same picture, but what space do we occupy? Are we participants or observers? Do we find ourselves in the light or the dark, and does our place change when circumstances change?
- † In reflecting on Rembrandt's painting in his book, Nouwen saw himself in each of the figures, and the same is probably true for us. As the dutiful priest who had followed the rules all his life but still felt estranged, lonely, and lost, Nouwen identified with the older brother.
- † But he also saw himself as the prodigal son. He would write: "...over and over again I have left home. I have fled the hands of blessing and run off to faraway places searching for love! This is the great tragedy of my life..."
Nouwen kept his vows of celibacy all his life, though he longed for intimacy

and relationship. He felt he didn't deserve God's grace, even though he deeply thirsted for the homecoming of the younger son.

- † One day, a close friend told Nouwen that he needed to stop dwelling in the identities of the two brothers and seek to become like the father. “Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father.” She went on to say: “You have been looking for friends all your life; you have been craving for affection as long as I've known you; you have been interested in thousands of things; you have been begging for attention, appreciation, and affirmation left and right.
- † The time has come to claim your true vocation—to be a father who can welcome his children home without asking them any questions and without wanting anything from them in return. Look at the father in your painting and you will know who you are called to be.”
- † Of course Nouwen resisted his friend's call to become like the accepting, forgiving father. His book is about how he fits into each identity, but it is primarily about how he is becoming like the father.
- † More importantly, his book is an invitation for his readers, and so for us, too. He writes: “And for you who will make this spiritual journey with me, I hope and pray that you too will discover within yourselves not only the lost children of God, but also the compassionate mother and father that is God.”
- † That's quite a challenge isn't it? I know it is for me. I've been pretty comfortable in my place in the painting as one of the siblings (even though they are male). But it's certainly a stretch to imagine myself as containing the image of “the compassionate mother and father that is God.”
- † How is this possible? For a moment, let's move away from the parable to Paul's message to the church in Corinth. He writes: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see

everything has become new! All of this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

† For me, Paul’s message speaks of new birth, a casting away of the old resentments, injuries, slights, and disappointments. It means a sloughing off of old habits, prejudices, judgments, and guilt. And that is only possible by returning, in some ways, to the womb of forgiveness.

† And here’s where Rembrandt’s painting comes in again. Henri Nouwen writes that he liked to ask friends what they saw upon first looking at the image of the father in the painting. “A benevolent patriarch,” was the usual reply. But over time, Nouwen saw more in the image of the father. Some of it Rembrandt clearly intended.

† Look at the difference in the two hands on the son’s shoulders. The father’s left hand is strong and masculine, but the right is elegant and more feminine and gentle. Nouwen also found in the red cloak of the father the image of a tent, as well as a vigilant mother bird’s wings. He wrote:

† *Every time I look at the tent-like and wings-like cloak, I sense the motherly quality of God’s love and my heart begins to sing in words inspired by the Psalmist:*

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High

And abide in the shade of the Almighty—

Say to your God: ‘My refuge, my stronghold, my God in whom I trust!

You conceal me with your pinions and under your wings I shall find refuge.’

† *As I now look again at Rembrandt’s old man bending over his returning son and touching his shoulders with his hands, I begin to see not only a father who clasps his son in his arms, but also a mother who caresses her child,*

surrounds him with the warmth of her body, and holds him against the womb from which he sprang.

- † *Thus the return of the Prodigal Son becomes the return to God's womb, the return to the very origins of being and again echoes Jesus' exhortation to Nicodemus, to be reborn from above."*
- † Some have seen in Rembrandt's portrait of the younger son with his bald or shaved head pressed against the father's lap just such an image of rebirth. I think that may be what I saw that took my breath away.
- † But how can we become like the father/mother of the parable? Nouwen says it is through practicing grief, forgiveness, and generosity. Why grief? Because it opens us up to receive compassion and then to offer it. We need to see the wounds and sins of the world and to mourn for God's creatures, including ourselves.
- † The second task is forgiveness. Nouwen writes: "I have often said 'I forgive you,' but even as I said these words my heart remained angry and resentful. I still wanted to hear the story that tells me I was right after all; I still wanted to hear apologies and excuses; I still wanted the satisfaction of receiving some praise in return—if only the praise of being so forgiving!"
- † But God's forgiving is unconditional; it comes from a heart that does not demand anything for itself....Practicing unconditional forgiveness causes me to have to step over or climb over the wounds and needs for compliments and gratitude. (Now that's a challenge for me.)
- † Finally, becoming like the compassionate father/mother means being generous without counting the cost when you give from who you are and what you have. Nouwen writes: "Every time I take a step in the direction of generosity, I know that I am moving from fear to love."

- † Practice grief, forgiveness, and generosity. It wasn't an easy path even for the great Henri Nouwen, and it isn't easy for us. But here on the fourth Sunday in Lent, traditionally called "refreshment" Sunday, and in England "mothering Sunday," we seek to return to the womb of God.
- † Will you allow God to make in and through you a new creation? Will you seek to be reconciled to God's compassionate life and heart? And then, out of gratitude, will you offer yourself to a ministry of reconciliation?
- † With God's help, will you begin to ask for and offer forgiveness, to mourn for the wounds of the world, and be generous with yourself—the divine image of the prodigal father/mother God in you?
- † Together, may it be so. Amen.

Source: Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal: A Story of Homecoming. 1994.

Adam Fronczek, "Sermon on the Fourth Day of Lent," <http://fourthchurch.org>