

“The Return of the Prodigal Son through Rembrandt’s brush – Part 3: The Father” A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
April 28, 2019, Fifth Sunday in Lent

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

This is the third sermon in our series reflecting on the parable of the Prodigal Son through Rembrandt’s painting, “The Return of the Prodigal Son”. In two previous sermons, we explored the younger and older sons in the painting and the parable. This week we’ll focus on the father.

The inspiration for this sermon series came from a book by Henri Nouwen entitled, **The Return of the Prodigal Son**. I would encourage you to read this book. The book explains Nouwen’s fascination with Rembrandt’s painting and how the painting affected Nouwen’s spiritual life, his relationship with God.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is widely known in the Christian world. Some of us identify with the younger son, some with the older son, and fewer with the father. Which individual do you identify with? No matter who you identify with, please clear those thoughts from your mind. I want all of us to take a fresh look at the parable. I’ll be asking you to consider your life and your relationship to God.

Rembrandt’s painted The Return of the Prodigal late in his life. It is believed to be the last painting of Rembrandt. Many consider it to be Rembrandt’s greatest painting. Does the painting depict a scene from the scripture that was read? Not at all. In the parable, the father and the two sons are not mentioned as being in same room. Rembrandt is taking artistic license with his painting. He’s taken the liberty to interpret the story to achieve the message he wants to get across in his painting.

The father. Look at him for a moment. He looks like an old man, probably a bit bent over. He must be a wealthy old man. He’s richly dressed in a gold embroidered garment and has on a deep red, rich looking cloak. Look at his face. What do you see? I see compassion, unconditional love, forgiveness coming from the father’s face. Perhaps there’s bit of relief in his face. His son, whom he anguished over, has come home. He longed for his son to return and that son has finally returned. That concern, that burden is lifted. I see a man totally focused on his returning son.

Who is the father to you? Since I said that Rembrandt is taking artistic license with this parable, who do you think Rembrandt is depicting as the father in the painting? The benevolent family patriarch? A wise old man? Would it be going to far to say that Rembrandt, in his old age, sees in the father our forgiving and loving God?

Look at the father’s hands. Rembrandt’s painting seems to center on the father’s hands. Through Rembrandt’s use of light, our eyes are drawn to them. The father’s hands are embracing the son. Take a closer look at the father’s hands. What do you see? I see two different hands. The left one touching the son’s right shoulder is more muscular. That hand seems to be holding the son, embracing him with a firm embrace.

Look at the father’s right hand. I hope that you can see it is different from the left. The fingers are closer together. The hand is refined, soft, tenderly touching the son. The right hand looks more like the hand of a mother gently embracing her son.

Is Rembrandt depicting the father as our God who has both a masculine side and a feminine side? I’m not limiting masculinity to males, nor am I limiting femininity to females. I realize that each of us shares a bit of both characteristics which makes sense since we were create in the image of God,

both male and female. Perhaps that's why Rembrandt depicted the father with two different hands to point out that God has both male and female characteristics as both the old and new testaments attest.

I mentioned that the father was fully focused on the son on his knees in front of him. But does that mean that the father loves the prodigal son more than the son that stayed home? What did the father in the parable do as soon as he heard that the older son was refusing to come to the party? The father immediately left the party and went to talk to the son. The father didn't criticize the older son but expressed his love for him. The father didn't favor one son over the other.

Does God compare you or me to another individual? I don't think so. We humans may compare. We may feel one person is loved more than another. You may have had that experience as a child. I certainly did. You may have felt that a pastor favored a certain group of church members more than the group you belong to. But God doesn't show favoritism. God loves each of us and welcomes all of us.

Another of Jesus' parables illustrates God's generous love for us – the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. You may remember that the vineyard owner hired workers throughout the day. At the end of the day all the workers received the same amount of pay. Those who worked the full day grumbled and asked why those who worked a shorter day got the same wages. The owner replies that he is generous and the workers who worked a longer day were paid what they agreed to. Why should the workers criticize the owner?

Why weren't those who worked the full day in the vineyard thankful for a day's work? Why didn't the workers rejoice that they have a generous boss? Why didn't the workers cheer when they learned that everyone was given the same attention? We compare. God doesn't. The father in the Prodigal Son parable loved both sons and wanted them to celebrate together, not have one be envious and bitter.

Why do we humans compare ourselves to each other, why do we show favoritism, why do we demand what we think is our fair share? If God doesn't play favorites and loves everyone equally, isn't that a behavior we ought to imitate? If God is an all-giving, forgiving God who does not judge God's children according to how well they behave, then it would seem our response, yours and mine, should be gratitude – and imitation of that behavior.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the returning son is busy rehearsing the speech he'll give his father to beg for forgiveness and to be allowed to return to his father's household not as a son, but as a servant. But the father runs to greet his son and then arranges a party to celebrate the occasion. If the father forgets his dignity and his age and runs to greet the prodigal son, what does that say about all the things we try to do or say like the prodigal son hoping to gain God's acceptance and love?

God is running to find us. What would it mean to let God run to you and embrace you? Would it mean that God would be happy and there'd be a party in heaven? I think so.

Jesus tells the parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep. The shepherd leaves the flock to find the one lost sheep. Once found, the shepherd calls his friends and neighbors together to celebrate. The woman with the lost coin cleans the house, finds the coin and calls her friends and neighbors together to celebrate. Both rejoice at finding what was lost. Likewise, Jesus says there is rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents. God wants to find you. Are you open to letting God find you?

Yes, God throws a party just as the father in the parable threw a party when his son returned home. God likes a party. Jesus was always at this dinner and that dinner. The Bible speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven as a joyful banquet. Jesus invites us to dine with him in the Lord's Supper, communion.

God offers us forgiveness, reconciliation and healing. God seeks us out. And now, God wants to invite us to a party!

God rejoices not because the problems of the world are solved, not because human suffering and pain have ended, not because your church has 1000 members. God rejoices because one, just one, of God's children who was lost has been found.

Then what is our job? What is the older son's job? What is the prodigal son's job? To rejoice with the father. To rejoice with God. To enter into that joy, God's joy. Many of us are just not comfortable being joyful. Have we become so accustomed to expecting conflict and problems and pain that we forget to see the joy that surrounds us? But don't all of you have a friend or two who see the good in every little thing in life, who see's God's hand in what happened that day and rejoices for what he or she sees? Wouldn't that be a good example to follow? Shouldn't we join God in God's joy?

The father in the Prodigal Son parable gave himself over to that joy as did the shepherd and the housewife. What can we learn from these examples? Why do we wait for the right moment to celebrate – until everyone becomes a Christ-follower, until there is peace on earth, until there is no more pain? Don't wait until all is well but celebrate every little hint of the Kingdom of God.

Yes, you will be called naïve, unrealistic, sentimental. You will be accused of ignoring the real problems. Jesus talked about wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes and persecution and imprisonment, hatred. There's no suggestion that the dark signs of the world will ever be absent. That doesn't matter. We can still be joyful. We can still celebrate knowing God's love is stronger than death, knowing that God wants us to live the abundant life. All it takes is one person repenting, one small act of unselfish love, one moment of forgiveness and God comes running to his returning son or daughter and the heavens rejoice.

Every moment of every day you and I can choose to be joyful or cynical. Cynicism – looking at the dark side of life. Cynics always point to approaching dangers, to hidden schemes, to things that can go wrong. The light that shines in the darkness is more powerful than the darkness. We can choose to be that light. We can choose to be joyful. We can celebrate people and experiences that reveal the presence of God. We can care about each other, share our possessions, forgive other's offences, foster a spirit of community. Choose joy!

Choose to be forgiving. Choose to love. Choose to be joyful. When you do all these things who might you be imitating? The father in the parable, of course! And God! That's our job as Christ-followers.

However, we are not to remain children all our lives. We are not to stay as the prodigal son on our knees in front of the father. We are not to remain the embittered son who stayed away from the party. We are to grow up, so to speak, and become like the father. We are to share God's forgiveness and love with others. We are to spread God's joy. We are to live in joy, the joy God gives us. Are you ready to live that way? Are you living that way?

I pray to God that you are. Our bulletin states, "Whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!" That's a good start on being the welcoming father who leaves the comfort of his home to run to greet the returning child.

May God bless your every effort.