

## “The Return of the Prodigal Son through Rembrandt’s brush – Part 1”

A sermon by Lee Ireland

Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church

March 31, 2019, Fourth 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.

I’m going to refer to Rembrandt’s painting “The Return of the Prodigal Son” as we reflect on the parable of the Prodigal Son. This is the first in a sermon series on Jesus’ prodigal son parable. This painting is considered by many to be the greatest religious painting ever. Linda and I saw this painting last summer at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. In the painting you see the three main characters from the parable: the father, the prodigal son, the son who stayed home.

Why am I interested in this painting and how it depicts the parable Jesus told? Last summer, while on our trip to St. Petersburg, I read a book by Henri Nouwen entitled: **The Return of the Prodigal Son**. 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 how you’ve viewed this parable’s message before or who you identified with, please clear those thoughts from your mind. Today, 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.

Before you can have a homecoming, there has to be a departure. **“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. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country.”**

Luke uses these few simple words to describe what happened. But these few words may keep us from realizing all that must have happened prior to the son’s leaving. The son’s leaving was hurtful, offensive, most likely rarely heard of in that day. We can only surmise, but deciding to leave home must have been on the son’s mind and in his plans for some time. He must have carefully planned out what he was going to do and what he was going to say to his father. He probably knew the risks involved. His father could have rejected the son’s request and thrown him out of the house. But my guess is that the son knew his father well and knew that he wouldn’t reject his request.

Today in Middle Eastern agricultural countries where property is passed from father to son, a request such as the younger son made would be like wishing your father was dead. Nouwen’s book, **The Return of the Prodigal Son**, relates it this way:

“Has anyone in your village every made such a request as the son did in this story?

Never! Could anyone ever make such a request? Impossible! If anyone ever did, what would happen? His father would beat him, of course! Why? The request means he wants his father to die.” (p 35)

Luke used simple words to describe what would be considered impossible in Jesus’ world, too.

The younger son left the safe, warm environment of his home. He rejected his upbringing. He rejected his father’s love for him. Today, we’d call him a rebellious youth. One whose behavior brings shame and disgrace on his family. Behavior which brings deep pain to the family. When I

talk to pastors, a few share this same pain, this hurt, when they describe to me that their son or daughter no longer goes to church or has a relationship with Jesus. Perhaps you've been in that place yourself. Were you the parent in pain or were you the son or daughter whose behavior caused the pain?

Jesus said, **"Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you."** Is your home in Jesus or have you rejected such a spiritual life and, like the younger son, chosen to leave home and go out on your own? Are you, like the younger son, searching for something beyond home? Are you dissatisfied with what God has to offer you?

The departure is done. Now on to the homecoming. The return. Look at the picture of the younger son, that dirty young man in the picture being embraced by his father. What do you see? The painting is quite detailed. Look at the feet first. The sandals are worn, falling apart. They speak of a long, humiliating journey. One shoe is off and falling apart. The other shows the wear of walking many miles. The exposed foot is scarred. The clothes on the young man's body are in tatters. Contrast them with the sumptuous, rich clothes of the father and the older son. They are the clothes of those with status. They provide dignity to the wearer, the dignity noticeably missing from the younger son. Look at the shaven head of the young man. No longer does he have the long hair he once proudly wore. We know that it was shameful to have shaved hair in Biblical times. Shaving one's hair at that time robbed you of your individuality.

There's one item on the younger son that I haven't mentioned. What is that? Yes, his sword. This is the son's last vestige of nobility. He could have sold his sword. Did he keep possession of it because it represented his past, that he was his father's son, that he came from nobility?

Pictured is a person who is empty, humiliated, defeated. What happened to the son in that distant land? Sure he squandered his money, but what happened to his soul? He was living in a world where other people's opinions mattered to him. At first he had money and people were attracted to him for what they could get from him. Once he lost it all, he no longer had any friends who cared for him, truly cared about him and his wellbeing. No one accepted him or took him in. He was lonely and rejected in a foreign country. His status was so low that he was treated like a slave feeding the pigs with pig food that he would love to have eaten. He was no longer treated as a human by those around him.

I hope that none of you have had this experience, but even within our small congregation there are probably people who have experienced such rejection and loneliness.

It is said that when we get to our lowest point, we often discover our deeper self. What the younger son realized was that he was his father's child. Once the young man realized that, he began to reclaim his sonship, even though he had lost all dignity connected to it. Perhaps he remembered the verse from Deuteronomy: **I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.** He chose to live instead of die. He chose to return to his home, to his father.

Each of us must make that same decision. Are we in a foreign land away from God, our home? Do we choose to die in that foreign land or do we, like the younger son, choose life, choose to return to our home in God?

The younger son definitely remembered the good times at home and how much his father loved him. He realized that he could not go home to reclaim that sonship based on any merit of his own, but he would go back and beg for mercy.

The son begins his journey home and practices the speech he will deliver to his father: **“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”** Think for a moment about what the young man says. He’s admitting he sinned, but is he truly asking for forgiveness? Isn’t he hoping his father will not punish him? Isn’t he making a ‘deal’ with his father? If you won’t punish me, I’ll be your hired hand. Is he truly admitting his sin and submitting himself to his father or is he trying to set the condition for his return?

The young man is still trying to protect himself, to have things his way, to be in control. Aren’t we all so often that way? We want forgiveness, but forgiveness on our terms. We do this because we think of God as one who is harsh and judgmental.

What is it that prevents us from accepting God’s forgiveness and the new beginning that God freely provides? God wants to restore each of us to our true daughtership or sonship, but we seem to want to settle for the job of a hired hand. What keeps us from accepting that God totally forgives us so that a completely new way of living becomes possible? As a hired hand, we can keep our distance, complain about our pay, reject what the father says. As the son or daughter, we have to accept our full dignity, our nobility, our place in God’s world and begin to prepare ourselves to become the father.

I don’t know about you, but I struggle with accepting God’s total forgiveness that makes a new way of living possible. I’m getting better at accepting. For me, it’s a slow process.

This coming week consider if you’re like the younger son who wants to be a hired hand or if you want to accept God’s total forgiveness and the new beginning that God freely provides. Let me know what your thoughts reveal.

May God bless your every effort.

To be continued.

## **“The Return of the Prodigal Son through Rembrandt’s brush – Part 2”**

A sermon by Lee Ireland Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church April 7, 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 second sermon in our series reflecting on the parable of the Prodigal Son through Rembrandt’s painting, “The Return of the Prodigal Son”. Last Sunday we explored the younger son in the painting and the parable. This week we’ll be examining the older son, the elder son, the son who stayed home.

As I mentioned last Sunday, the inspiration for this sermon series came from a book by Henri Nouwen entitled, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. 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? As I said last week, no matter how you’ve viewed this parable’s message before or who you identified 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 painting is entitled, *The Return of the Prodigal*. Does the painting depict a scene from the scripture that was read? In the parable, the two sons and the father are not mentioned as being in the same room, are they? Rembrandt is taking artistic license. He’s taken the liberty to interpret the story to achieve the message he wants to get across in his painting. With that understanding, let’s look at the painting. Kevin made photocopies of the painting so you could have a closer look than the TV screen provides.

Look at the way light is used in the painting. The way Rembrandt used light in the picture immediately draws your eyes to the father and the younger son. Now direct your attention to the right side of the painting to the man standing there, the older son. He’s dressed much the same as the father. Both wear large red cloaks over their shoulders. Both have beards. The older son has a carved, long walking stick held in his hands that seems to accentuate his stiff, erect posture. Notice his hands. They are clasped together in contrast to the father’s hands that are open and welcoming.

The light on the face of the older son seems to be constricted when compared to the light on the father’s face that flows through his whole body and seems to flow into the younger son’s body. Rembrandt has painted the light on the face of the older son, but the rest of the body of the older son is in the dark.

Look at the expression on the older son’s face. Is it warm and welcoming? Is it cold and distant? Notice the distance between the elder son and the father. In that distance there’s a tension as we look at the painting. What is the older son thinking? Why is he so distant? Is there anger, resentment, bitterness in the older son’s face?

Listen again to the older son’s words when he speaks to his father. Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But

when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!

What mood do you detect? It sounds to me like the older son is lost in resentment. He is a son who is full of self-pity, full of self-righteousness, full of jealousy. He has lived up to what he thinks are his father's expectations. He believes he has done everything an obedient son should do. As a dutiful son, he looked good on the outside, but on the inside, well, that appears to be another story.

In truth the father had lost two sons. Why do I say that? The younger son was lost to the father because he left to find happiness and freedom in a distant country. Though the older son stayed home he was also lost to his father, but in a different way. He was the good son who did everything he was supposed to do, but inside he was angry, unhappy. The scripture records the older son's words when he erupts with anger and resentment. Seeing the father's joy at the return of the younger son brought out the emotions that the older son had kept buried deep within him. He could not accept his father's words of love for him nor the joy his father felt at the return of the younger son. He could not join in the celebration. In that sense he was just as lost from the father as the younger son.

Did the older son feel envy towards his brother? Did he wonder why he was trapped being the good son when he would have liked to have gone to a foreign country and had some fun? Do any of you feel that way about your siblings? Were you the dutiful child that would have liked to have sown a few wild oats as the expression goes?

The older son feels like he hasn't gotten what was due to him for working so hard, for being so obedient. You could almost hear the older son saying to his father, "I worked so hard. I did so much. Why do people not thank me, not honor me? Why do you pay attention to someone who insulted you and squandered his inheritance on parties and prostitutes? Pay attention to me!"

Is this you? Are you the older son who feels unappreciated? Are people taking advantage of you, leaving you out of the celebration – the celebration that should be for you? What's keeping you from joining the party and celebrating the joy of the father's forgiveness? The resentful heart of the older son kept him from sharing the joy. Are you like the older son?

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son provides no happy ending. The story is not tied up with a bow that says all ended well and everyone lived happily ever after. No, this is not a fairy tale. We don't know what happened to the two brothers. The only sure thing we know about this parable is that the father forgives, the father loves – no matter what.

Arthur Freeman writes: The father loves each son and gives each the freedom to be what each son can, but he, the father, cannot give them freedom they will not take nor adequately understand. The father seems to realize, beyond the customs of his society, the need of his sons to be themselves. But he also knows their need for his love and a home. How their stories will be completed is up to each son. The fact that the parable is not completed makes it certain that the father's love is not dependent upon an appropriate completion of the story. The father's love is only dependent on himself and remains part of his character. (p 78)

Can the older son return from his lost state, his resentment and anger at his father? Will he accept his father's words of love, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours? The father ran out to meet both sons. He loves them both equally. He wants both to sit at the table with him and share in his joy. Can the older son accept his father's love and share in the

joyful celebration? I'll let you imagine the ending to the story, but I'd like to make this story a bit more personal. I'd like to use this painting and this parable to help you to consider your life and your relationship to God.

Perhaps there's a little of the older son or an older daughter in each of us. The question then is what can we do to return to the father, to accept the father's love, to accept God's love?

If we see ourselves in the older son, then we must examine our lives to determine if we are lost like the elder son who had separated himself from his father. Like the father in the painting and the parable, God has run out to greet us, to bring us home. But we may not realize the resentment and anger that is deep within us that keeps us from accepting God's love. If we are to overcome our anger and resentment, we must trust God.

Trust can be thought of as the deep belief that God wants us to come home. If you doubt that you are worth finding or that you are not worthy of God's love, then you cannot be found. If you listen to that dark voice in you that says God really doesn't love you, that God really will not welcome you home; then you will not be found.

Trust entails moving beyond your complaints and doubts - and to act. Act with conviction that God is seeking you and you will be found, that you can trust God. If you continually tell yourself that you are unworthy, you can become deaf to God's calling you, to God's voice calling you home, to God's telling you how much you are loved.

Along with trust there must be gratitude. Gratitude is the opposite of resentment. If you are stuck in resentment, you cannot experience life as a gift.

Gratitude is seeing all of life as a gift. You can discipline yourself to have gratitude by acknowledging all that you are is a gift from God, a gift to be celebrated, a gift that brings joy. That's why we share our joys at prayer time. I want each of us to develop a habit of seeing God's gifts on a daily basis. Your mentioning them on Sunday exhibits your understanding of the gift and your gratitude for God's blessings.

You can choose gratitude instead of complaint. You can choose to see goodness and beauty in your life.

Both trust and gratitude require us to take risks because distrust and resentment, that inner voice, keeps telling you and me how dangerous it is to let go of a carefully controlled life. At some point each of us has to take a leap of faith and let trust and gratitude have a chance if we are to accept God's love and forgiveness.

To have trust and gratitude necessitates that others become your focus. That means love without expectation of love in return, give without wanting to receive, invite without hoping to be invited. Every time you do these things, you grow closer to God, the God who wants to welcome you home, to love you without expectations, the God who invites you to experience life's joys.

Both the elder son and the younger son had left home. Each for their own reason. Which one do you identify with? Probably there's a little of both in all of us. But I would venture to say that there are more people who identify with the elder son, who do not feel appreciated and are angry and resentful. If you are like the elder son, remember that God loves you and you can choose to develop gratitude and trust and open yourself to the love of God, to the God who is standing right next to you ready to take your hand and lead you home.

## “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.