



“The Great Embrace”

Luke 15:11-32

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, June 5, 2011

Priest, professor and author, Henri Nouwen, was chatting with a colleague in her office when he noticed a large poster hanging on her door. The poster revealed an older man wearing a large red cloak tenderly touching the shoulders of a disheveled boy kneeling at the man’s feet. Nouwen was drawn to the intimacy between the two figures and the way the old man’s hands embraced the shoulders of the boy. He asked his friend about it and was told that it was a reproduction of Rembrandt’s painting of today’s parable.

Nouwen had just finished a lecture tour that had left him mentally and physically exhausted. The tender embrace of the father and son struck a chord. Rembrandt’s painting represents the yearning of the human spirit for a return to a lasting home where we can step into the loving arms of our divine Parent who wants to hold us in an eternal embrace.<sup>1</sup>

Nouwen’s fascination with the painting continued and three years later he leapt at the chance to go to St. Petersburg, Russia, where the painting hangs in Hermitage Museum. It is no small piece of art. It is eight feet high and six feet wide.

Eager to learn more about the painting, Nouwen studied the life of Rembrandt, and discovered that the artist was not far from death when he painted this masterpiece. The more he read and studied, it became apparent that this painting depicted not only the parable, but was a powerful statement of Rembrandt’s own tumultuous life.

The young Rembrandt was a mirror image of the young man in the parable who “gathered everything he had, and traveled to a distant country where he squandered his property in dissolute living.” Although born into a pious family, Rembrandt was brash, insensitive, and arrogant. He was strongly convinced of his own genius and eager to explore everything the world had to offer. His primary concern was money. He made a lot, he spent a lot and he lost a lot. His self-portraits painted during his early years reveal that he was a man hungry for fame and adulation, who possessed an insatiable appetite for extravagant clothing and expensive jewelry.<sup>2</sup>

Today’s parable says, “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.’” New Testament scholar, Ken Bailey, helps us understand the severity of the son’s request. For more than 15

years Bailey asked people from all over the Middle East about the implications of a son asking his father for his share of the inheritance while the father is still living. Each time – the same answer. Bailey said the conversation usually went something like this:

“Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?”

“Never.”

“If anyone ever did, what would happen?”

“His father would beat him, of course.”

“Why?”

“Because the request means he wants his father to die.”<sup>3</sup>

The son’s request is a cruel rejection of his father. But it is even worse than that. After the father divides the property between his two sons, our text says, “The younger son gathered all he had and travelled to a distant country.” In other words, he sold his half of the family farm. When he did, the family rift “became public knowledge and the family was shamed before the entire community.”<sup>4</sup>

And when the story says he took off for a distant country, it does not simply mean that the young man wanted to see more of the world. It means he wanted to cut himself free from the way of living, thinking, and acting that had been handed down to him. This son is so self-centered that he bucks the values of his father, his community and his faith to follow his dreams. Of course, they are not so much noble dreams as bodily desires. He is not on a spiritual quest; he is giving in to greed. He is not pursuing a call to a purposeful life, he is surrendering to lust. He is not on a journey in search of truth; he is yielding to arrogance - imagining he is smarter than everyone else. The prodigal son may be part of an ancient parable, but who would deny that he is also a contemporary figure?

Last week, columnist David Brooks wrote a piece in which he disagreed with many of the speeches being delivered to students at their graduations. Brooks noted that these days many graduates are told: “Follow *your* passion, chart *your* own course, march to the beat of *your* own drummer, follow *your* dreams and find *yourself*.” He points out that “this mantra misleads on nearly every front” because becoming an adult is not primarily about finding freedom and autonomy, but rather “finding serious things to tie yourself down to...making sacred commitments.” Brooks concludes his column by stating: “The purpose of life is not to find yourself. It’s to lose yourself.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus drove home the same point 20 centuries ago when he said, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8.35)

In our parable, the defiant younger son is clueless. He cuts his ties and wanders far from home. He thinks he has discovered what he’s seeking - loads of friends and a life of pleasure. But once he has burned through his shekels, he finds himself friendless and lost. He was amusing to others only as long as he could be used for their purposes. Once he ran out of money to spend and gifts to give, the good times came to an abrupt halt.

When we have wandered far away from God it takes time to find our way back. We must uncover our self deception and face some things about ourselves we would rather not admit. We might find ourselves like the son heading home and praying that we will not be turned away. But like the son, after we recognize the mistakes we have made and the pain we have caused, we

might feel that the best we can hope for is lukewarm acceptance. In the parable, as the son is walking home, he rehearses the speech he will make to his father – if his father will even listen after the shame he has brought to him. He says, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”

In ancient Middle Eastern culture, that was pushing the limits on what he might expect. Patriarchs of a clan were to be respected and honored. Their wishes were to be obeyed; their decisions were final. And Patriarchs were expected to conduct themselves in ways that were worthy of such honor. “Patriarchs did not run. They did not leave their place at the head of the table once guests were present. Patriarchs did not plead with their children; they told their children what to do.”<sup>6</sup> The prodigal rehearsed a speech that he thought might touch his father’s heart, because he knew it was a long shot that his father would even allow him to stand on what was remaining of his property.

As it turns out, the son does not really know his father. Because every day since the son left home his father has been out on the porch peering down the road for him. And once he spots his son, he cannot contain himself. He dashes down the road and embraces his son. The son blurts out his well rehearsed lines, but the father appears not to hear. He is too busy calling out for someone to bring a robe, not just any robe, but the best one in the house. He says “Put a ring on his finger and bring sandals for his feet, start preparing a feast because we are going to have a great celebration. I thought my son was dead, but he’s alive. He was lost, but now he’s found!”

Each of us has that defiant son within us. We spend too much time wandering away from God and making poor decisions. Part of this story is about turning our lives around and returning to God.

But that is not the end of the parable. There is an older son, too. A faithful son. This son was responsible, hard-working and obedient. The other children in the neighborhood had probably gotten tired of hearing their parents say, “Why can’t you be more like he is?”

Outwardly the elder son was ideal, but there was something else going on inside of him. When his younger brother returned home, it erupted and it was ugly. In addition to being responsible, hard-working and obedient, he is resentful, selfish and unforgiving.

The elder son was out in the fields working when his younger brother returned. As the elder son comes in from the fields he hears music and singing. A servant shares with him the wonderful news: “Your brother, who we thought we’d never see again, has come home! Your father is having a grand party to celebrate his return.”

The elder brother is not enthralled with the news. He does not rush inside to welcome his brother home. Instead, he is blinded by jealousy. He is resentful and refuses to join the party.

Many of us have the elder brother in us. Can we truly rejoice when something good comes to someone else, or do we question whether she deserves it? Can we be genuinely happy for a friend whose life is touched by grace, or are we jealous?

Today’s parable is most widely known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Over the years, many have suggested that a better name for it might be the Parable of the Lost Sons. Yet, the heart of this story is not really about either son, but rather a father’s determination to love his children despite all the risks involved.

Love makes you vulnerable. Love exposes you to the pain of rejection. It makes you susceptible to betrayal. But the father in this story loves anyway because it is at the core of who he is. He is a wise and compassionate parent whose love is immeasurable.

God wants us to grasp how deeply we are loved. It is because of God's love for us that we are shown how to live. However, since we have the freedom to choose what we will do, we sometimes wander far astray. When we do, we not only impoverish our own lives, but we also inflict suffering on our loving parent who envisions something much greater for us. When we fall prey to greed, jealousy or resentment, we thrust a dagger into God's heart. We may think that we're only hurting ourselves or inflicting pain on someone we think deserves it, but when we injure ourselves or strike out against another, we inflict pain on our loving Creator.

This is embodied by the father in the parable. He endures the pain caused by a child who rejects him and runs away, and he endures the pain of a child who has stayed close to home but has become resentful. This father responds not with punishments or lectures, but with compassion. His desire is not to meet out an appropriate punishment, but to forgive so that healing may begin.

Our parable ends with the father and older son standing outside and the father pleading with him to join the celebration. It is unclear what the son decides to do. Barbara Brown Taylor notes that "It feels good to stand outside even when it dishonors your father. It feels good to know who's right, who's wrong, and which one you are, even when that shames your father and breaks his heart...Meanwhile, there is a banquet going on. You can hear the music even outside. Your father won't force you to go into the house. He'll just stand in the yard with you. What's left of his honor is in your hands. You can go to the party as you are, as long as you don't insist on staying that way."<sup>7</sup> Your choice.

#### NOTES

1. Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p.5.
2. Ibid., p. 32.
3. Ibid.
4. Kenneth Bailey, *The Pursuing Father*.
5. David Brooks, "It's Not About You," *New York Times*, May 30, 2011.
6. Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Parable Of The Dysfunctional Family," March 18, 2007.
7. Ibid.