

The Return of the Prodigal Son

He was a prolific author and a sought-after speaker. He taught at Harvard and lectured at Yale, Duke, Oxford, Cambridge. He had a long and prestigious career in academia. But a famous painting that had been reproduced into a poster, changed his life forever. From the moment that Henri Nowen saw the poster of Rembrandt's painting entitled **The Return of the Prodigal Son** hanging on the back of a colleague's door, his life would never be the same.

He had just finished a 6 week lecturing tour of the United States, calling upon Christian communities to do anything they could to stop violence and war in Central America. Nowen was adored and applauded by crowds of intelligentsia, but all the while, he was experiencing devastating loneliness. He was in a state of physical and emotional exhaustion. Amid all the prestige and sophistication, it was a very dark time in his life.

When Nowen first saw the painting, even that cheap reproduction, his heart leapt. The tender embrace of the father and son in Rembrandt's painting expressed everything that Nowen desired at that moment for himself. He saw himself as the son exhausted from long travels. He yearned to be embraced. He longed to be held. The 'son-come-home' was all he wanted to be. For so long, he had been going from place to place, teaching, challenging, beseeching, consoling. A prolific and famous author, lecturer, professor. Now he desired only to rest safely in a place where he could feel a sense of belonging. A place where he could feel at home.

Can you imagine this? Can you relate to this? No matter how rich or famous or educated or young or old or settled or confident or beautiful or sought after, there are times in all of our lives when, like the Prodigal Son, all we want is to be welcomed home, held, received, loved. Can you relate to that?

Are you familiar with L'Arche communities? L'Arche was started by the wonderful Jean Vanier, Daybreak in Toronto being one of them....communities for people with mental and physical disabilities.

There is a l'Arche community in Arnprior. Rev. Dr. Nowen went from lecturing to the finest minds around the world, to helping special needs people brush their teeth, looking after their toilet needs, dressing them and helping them to feed themselves. The transition in many ways was terrifying for him, but for the first time in a long time, Nowen felt like he was home.

The original Rembrandt painting was acquired by Catherine the Great in 1766 for the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, Russia. In the transition process from Harvard to L'Arche , so obsessed by the painting, Nowen went to St. Petersburg, and with the permission of the Hermitage staff, sat in front of Rembrandt's masterpiece for hours....reflecting, making notes, wondering, imagining. This experience would lead to his amazing book with the same title as Rembrandt's painting.

You are part of a family? I wonder how you relate to this story?

The dynamics of this family are not so unique. The older son feels like his father loves his brother than them. Personally, I encourage this. I often tell whichever child of ours I am with at the moment, that **they** are my favorite. The other two don't hear me. But if they do find out that I said that, it just makes them dig in a bit, and up their game!

Parenting 101. You're welcome.

I think that you can agree, that sometimes we all feel less loved.

Sometimes we feel that a parent, or a friend, or a partner, or God, loves someone else more than they love us. That never feels good. No one likes feeling rejected, or not good enough, or less loved than.

We don't really know why, but for one reason or another, the younger son in this parable wanted his inheritance. His father obliged. The son gratefully took his inheritance and went off. He had some bad luck, he made some bad decisions, his life came unravelled, and eventually he found himself in a dreadful way. His last hope was to return home, on

bended knee, not knowing if he would be rejected or welcomed back. Utterly broken and humiliated, the younger brother returned seeking forgiveness. Longing to be loved. The broken down son knew full well that his older brother and all the farm staff could not help but see what a mess he had made of his life. That must have been so difficult for him. But he had no choice.

His older brother could not stand it. The farm staff could not make sense of it. But his father welcomed him home with open arms. With unbridled enthusiasm his father insisted that they throw a wonderful party to celebrate his son's return. What was lost, was found. What was given up for dead, had come back to life.

Imagine how that humiliated, broken young son must have felt!!!

Shocked? Bewildered? So thankful! So thankful!

The father.....so happy.....so excited.....so thankful....so thankful!

The older son.....resentful.... taken for granted.....angry.....

“ Father you never even offered to kill an old goat for me. I have stuck by you. I have worked side by side the whole time and there is no party for me. Yet my brother has taken off....made a mess of everything you gave him, treated his own life with reckless disrespect and now he comes crawling home after having to feed with the pigs. And how do you respond? You kill the fatted calf! You bring out the best robe and rings! Music fills the air and you want us to celebrate.....like this is a wonderful day! He does not deserve any of it! And for me.....nothing!”

Who do you relate to in this story?

Can you relate to the **older son**.... who stuck by his father's side day in and day out? Feeling so jealous – so angry – so unappreciated.

Can you relate to the **younger son**....crawling home broken and beaten.

Can you relate to the **father**....he thought his son was gone forever.

Who do you relate to most in this parable....the father, the eldest son, or the younger son. Based on your own experience of travelling

through this life, perhaps there is something in each of these three characters to which you can relate.

This story is filled with some fundamental Biblical concepts -

This notion of **forgiveness**. Letting it go! Wiping the slate clean.

This notion of **love without condition**. No strings attached. Love that knows no limits.

This thing called **Grace**....goodness, love, kindness, generosity we don't deserve it, we haven't earned it, and yet someone offers it to us.

It doesn't say, but I want to believe that the eldest son came around. I want to believe that he eventually welcomed his younger brother back.

I want to believe that the joy and love they once shared had returned and their relationship was reignited as only family members can reignite.

Have you ever made a mistake? Have you ever made a bad decision?

Have you ever needed to ask someone to forgive you? Has anyone

ever needed to ask you to forgive them? Were you able and willing to do that?

Sometimes, we think someone should ask us for our forgiveness but they don't. We can forgive, before we are even asked for forgiveness.

If we carry resentment and hurt around with us, it is toxic to our system.

The father in Rembrandt's painting forgave. I want to believe that the older brother did as well.

It was time to rejoice. Rejoice in new beginnings. Rejoice in the love that is all around. Rejoice in the wonderful, imperfect, amazing people that are all around us.

Time to sing and dance and rejoice.....new life abounds! Grace to give others. Love to receive and love to give away!

Blessings to you on your journey.

Amen