

LENT 4 C

March 6, 2016

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

*"The Treasure of a Father's Love"*

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

It all began with a chance encounter with the famous painting by Rembrandt entitled, *"Return of the Prodigal Son."* Henri Nouwen, well-known Catholic contemplative and writer says that the painting moved him so deeply that he wrote a book about this most beloved of Jesus' parables.

Nouwen says that he soon discovered that **he is the younger son**. If we're honest, we can all relate.

There are many ways in which, like the younger son, we become separated from God. Sometimes, we just become distracted; too busy with all the other important things in our lives, and before we know it, we feel far from God.

At other times, we turn away from God because we may feel that God has let us down.

More often, it's because we **want to do things our way**. We want to be free.

But, if, by the grace of God, we're brought to our senses, we come to realize that apart from God we can't be truly free. Because the power of sin will always enslave us.

And then we discover a longing deep within – a homesickness – a desire to return to our loving Father.

The wonderful message of the parable of the prodigal Son is that we can always return home. This is the amazing treasure of our heavenly Father's love.

That was Nouwen's experience, when he first encountered the Rembrandt painting.

Here's how he describes it:

*"I was dead tired and very lonely. I felt like a vulnerable little child who wanted to crawl onto its mother's lap and cry.*

*It was in this condition that I first encountered Rembrandt's Prodigal Son. My heart leapt when I saw it.*

*After my long journey, the tender embrace of the father and son in the painting expressed everything I desired at that moment. I was, indeed, the son exhausted from long travels; I wanted to be embraced; I was looking for a sense of belonging.*

In Luke, Jesus told three parables in a row about lost-ness: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and, here, the lost son. And each one of them clearly declares that we worship a God who loves us unconditionally; a God who will turn heaven and earth upside down if we become lost; a savior who will go seeking after us until he can bring us home again.

The Father in the parable welcomes his lost son home with open arms, and declares that the whole household must party, because *"this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found."*

Robert Capon says this is a reminder of the forgiveness we are given in baptism. He writes:

*"The sheer brilliance of the retention of infant baptism by a large portion of the church is the fact that babies can do absolutely nothing to earn, accept, or believe in forgiveness. The church, in baptizing them simply **declares that they have it.***

*We are not forgiven because we made ourselves forgivable or even because we had faith; ... we are forgiven for one reason only: because Jesus died for our sins."*

This is the treasure of a Father's unconditional love; given to all of us **younger, prodigal sons and daughters.**

**But there's more!**

As he pondered this parable, Nouwen came to see that **he's also the elder son.** And so are we!

It's **often easier** to be the **younger son** than to be the **elder brother or sister.** If you don't believe me, just ask my **sister Becky**, who is the oldest of four.

She loves to complain – **even now when I'm 66 years old!** – that as a teenager, **I always got to do things she was never allowed to do.**

It's hard being the eldest child. (Incidentally, Mary Kay is the oldest of six.)

For Henri Nouwen it was a shock to think of himself as the elder brother in this parable. He says,

*"I came to see how I had lived a very dutiful life. ...I had always been obedient to my parents, my teachers, and my God. But, with all of that, I may have been just as lost as the younger son. I suddenly saw myself in a completely new way. I saw my jealousy, my anger, and most of all, my self-righteousness. I saw how much of my thinking and feeling was ridden with resentment."*

Nouwen goes on to say,

*"I had been working very hard on my father's farm, but had never fully tasted the joy of being at home. Instead of being grateful for all the privileges I'd received, I had become a very resentful person; jealous of my younger brothers and sisters in the faith who had taken so many risks and were so warmly welcomed back."*

You see, the elder brother or sister is often oblivious to the great treasure of being able to live within the father's love every day. We good church people are so like the elder brother.

When you come forward for communion this morning, I invite you to take a moment to look closely at the painting which will be displayed. Here's what Nouwen saw:

*"Rembrandt includes the elder son in the homecoming scene. And what a stark contrast we find between the father and the elder brother. Watching the father embracing his returning son, the elder brother appears very withdrawn.*

*The father bends over his returning son. The elder son stands stiffly erect.... The father's hands are spread out and touch the homecomer in a gesture of blessing; the son's are clasped together and held close to his chest...."*

Nouwen concludes,

*"Not only did the younger son, who left home to look for freedom and happiness, get lost, but the one who stayed home also became a lost man. On the outside, he did all the things a good son is*

*supposed to do. He did his duty, worked hard every day, and fulfilled all his obligations but he became increasingly unhappy and unfree."*

As I said earlier, it's not easy being the elder brother or sister. It's hard to faithfully come to church every week and try your best to follow in the path Jesus has shown us. It can be hard to do that and **seemingly get no recognition for it.**

But stop, Do you remember why Jesus told this parable?

He told it for the Pharisees and scribes – you know, the folks who go to church every Sunday, give generously to the church, and always try to do the right thing.

These good church folks were complaining that Jesus was spending too much time with the tax the sinners. He was giving too much attention to the folks who seemed to screw up every chance they got and who **didn't even seem to try to live a moral life.**

The Pharisees **were enslaved by the resentment** they shared with the elder brother. And sometimes, so are we.

Friends, if you're one of those **wonderful saints** who are **here every week, I truly give thanks to God for you.** After all – **I'm here too!** But remember, Jesus told this parable for you and me.

He's trying to break through to us; to break down our resentment **so that we can join the party** that he throws for **every terrible sinner or loser**; for **all those outsiders who return** to the Father.

You see, he wants all of us – elder and younger brothers and sisters alike – to enjoy the great treasure of His love.

It's **hard not to resent the younger brother.** He always **seems to get away with murder**, and then he's **welcomed back with open arms.**

My friends, YOU AND I ARE THE ELDER BROTHER. And the more I reflect on the elder brother in me, the more I realize how deeply rooted this form of lost-ness really is.

Can the elder son in me come home? Can I be "found" like the younger son was found? It's clear to me that by ourselves, we cannot be found. That's what it means to be lost!

We cannot heal ourselves of the resentment of **"elder-brother-itis."**

But WE CAN BE HEALED FROM ABOVE; by THE GOD WHO REACHES DOWN.

It helps to remember that, in the parable, **the Father calls both brothers, "my son," even when they're at their worst.**

**We are God's children; his beloved sons and daughters, and nothing we can do will change that.** God will continue to call you *"my daughter" or "my son,"* forever!

**Sometimes we're the younger son,** lost in our rebellion against God. **Sometimes we're the elder brother;** lost in our self-righteousness.

God calls to each of us today; to the **younger sons and daughters** here this morning; and to **all the elder brothers and sisters as well.**

**God pleads with us to be part of the celebration.** He wants us to **experience the joy of heaven.**

He wants so much to share with us the treasure of His forgiving love.

**GOD WANTS TO BE HAPPY.** But, **just like with earthly parents, GOD CAN ONLY BE AS HAPPY AS HIS SADDEST CHILD.**

This morning, at the foot of the steps, where the powerful painting by Rembrandt will be displayed, **God has prepared a celebration – a banquet for you.**

Through the power of Jesus' body and blood **he wants to transform your rebellion and resentment into thanksgiving and joy.**

**So please...**

**COME!**

**JOIN THE PARTY.**

**It WON'T BE COMPLETE WITHOUT**

**YOU. AMEN**