

March 14, 2010

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Northfield, VT United Church of Northfield

Joshua 5: 9-12

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

The God of Extravagant Welcome

Rev. Roger L. Brown

Introduction

Today's Gospel story is well-known to most of us. We know it best by its classic name, "The Prodigal Son." So we know best the story of the younger son. We remember the older son, who felt he did not get what was due him. The story also provides us with amazing insight into the character of the Father.

This Gospel parable is very famous and has many lessons within it.

Henri Nouwen Insight on Multiple Interpretations

In 1986 Henri Nouwen, a Dutch theologian and writer, toured St. Petersburg, Russia, the former Leningrad. While there he visited the famous Hermitage where he saw, among other things, Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son. The painting was in a hallway and received the natural light of a nearby window. Newman stood for two hours, mesmerized by this remarkable painting. As he stood there the sun changed, and at every change of the light's angle he saw a different aspect of the painting revealed. He would later write: "There were as many paintings in the Prodigal Son as there were changes in the day."

Some Lessons to Learn

First, there is the younger son, the one who took his inheritance, squandered it, and returned home. He learned the meaning of forgiveness. I think he also the meaning of family, for I think he was really very alienated from his family.

I think we most commonly identify with the son. And he stands out in a parable named after him – the Prodigal Son. And in many ways, in our lives, we may have gone astray, and returned to our senses.

John Newton

John Newton - the writer of one of the Church's favorite hymns identified with the youngest son.

In the year 1779, after a tumultuous life as a sailor, a dissolute life, a bitter and angry life in which he mocked those who believed in God and tore down the faith of those who lived decently, he came to his senses and he gave his life to Christ, and he found in Him a welcome - a love – that until that time he had only dreamed of. Listen to the words of Newton's most famous hymn:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.

T'was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved,
how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed

The older son had to really face the folly of his poor relationships with his brother and father.

Survey of the Congregation

I'd like to take a moment to do a quick survey.

Who among you was the younger brother or younger sister?

Who among you was an older brother or older sister?

Who identifies with the father? Mothers can welcome back sons and daughters too.

The Father

This morning, I want to focus on the Father in the parable. The father is present in the relationships with both sons. We see him in relationship with the household servants. Some of you here are fathers and grandfathers, so you may relate to this story. Some of us have been the prodigal, going away and returning home. Some of us have been the older brother, perplexed by the relationships of our siblings in relation to our parents.

The Focus on the Father

When we look carefully at how the father relates to his sons, we can see lots of evidence of his openness and concern for them. We see too, that he takes action, living positively into his relationship with his sons.

He offers his younger son the chance to grow, and is willing to sacrifice to do so.

He runs out eagerly to meet his son, and clearly had been watching and waiting for him to return.

He takes the son in without regard to his son's excuses.

He celebrates and rejoices. (psalm)

He treats both sons equally.

Henri Nouwen Reflection on the Rembrandt Painting

Henri Nouwen in his book, The Return of the Prodigal Son, reflects on Rembrandt's painting and its spiritual significance is so powerful a way, that I want to share a bit of his writing with you.

“Instead of being called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, it really could have been called “The Welcome by the Compassionate Father.” The emphasis is less on the son than on the father. The parable is in truth a “Parable of the Father's Love.” Looking at the way in which Rembrandt portrays the father, there came to me a whole new interior understanding of tenderness, mercy, and forgiveness. Seldom, if ever, has God's immense, compassionate love been expressed in such a poignant way. Every detail of the father's figure- is facial expression, his posture, the colors of his dress, and, most of all, the still gesture of his hands – speaks of the divine love for humanity that existed from the beginning and ever will be.”

“Everything comes together here Rembrandt's story, humanity story, and God's story. Time and eternity intersect, approaching death and everlasting life touch each other. Sin and forgiveness embrace; the human and the divine become one.”

“What gives Rembrandt's portrayal of the father such an irrasistable power is that the lmost divine is captured in the most human. I see a half-blind old man with a mustache and a parted beard, dressed in a gold-embroidered garment and a deep red cloak, laying his large stiffened hands on the shoulders of his returning son. This is very specific, concrete and describable.”

“I also see, however, infinite compassion, unconditional love, everlasting forgiveness – divine – realities – emanating from a Father who is the creator of the universe. Here, both the human and the divine, the fragile and the powerful, the old and the eternally young are fully expressed. “

A Vision of the Welcoming Church

I am also struck by the idea that the story of the Welcoming Father, not only compels our character as holy and spiritual individuals, but compels us to be that way as a congregation.

While I was making preparations for yesterday morning's planning retreat, I paid a visit to the United Church of Christ vital church website. I went there looking for scripture ideas for the planning retreat kickoff worship time. I found some scripture texts I could use, but I also found something else which fits our reflection this morning.

I found a list of the essential characteristics of the United Church of Christ – a list which may well fit the United Church of Northfield? Let me read you this list. Then I will comment briefly on these pithy spiritual statements. Indeed, each one deserves a sermon. (They fit the characteristics of the Father in today's parable.)

[We are a People of Covenant](#)

[We are One at Baptism and at the Table](#)

[We are People of Extravagant Welcome](#)

[We Belong to Christ](#)

[We Listen for a Still-speaking God](#)

[We Thank God by Working for a Just and Loving World](#)

Conclusion

The parable challenges us to see harmony and renewal in our relationships. More than any other character in the parable, we are challenged to imitate the father, as a model of caring and outreach and love.

Secondly, through this wonderful heartwarming story, we have some wonderful insight into the character of God, the Father. So, this story provides us with a model or a vision for our church as a welcoming community.

Connection to Joshua story – the Hebrew people are encouraged to live on their own without so much help from Yaweh.

Commendations

As an ambassador of Christ, let us go forth as a person who welcome all persons with God's open-armed love.

Let us be a people who, to use Nouwen 's wonderful adjectives, live out infinite compassion, unconditional love, and everlasting forgiveness

Amen!