

The Compassionate Mother/Father
Luke 15: 11-32
Sermon by Evie Waack, Minister for Spiritual Growth
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During Lent I led a Sunday School class in the "study" of a small book. The book is The Return of the Prodigal Son by Henri Nouwen. Henri Nouwen is one of my favorite spiritual writers and for the past year or so a friend of mine frequently spoke of this book. Reflecting on this story through this book seemed good for Lent.

In this book, Henri Nouwen wrote about his experiences when he first saw a poster of this painting by Rembrandt. He eventually went to the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia to see the original painting. In St. Petersburg, Nouwen sat in front of the actual life size painting. Imagine that it were in this room. It could probably fill up much of this space in the front of the sanctuary.

So our Sunday School class began our Lenten journey "home" through this story of the Prodigal Son with the help of this book. We also had this poster. One of the first things we did was listen to the story. While listening we wrote down the different characters or persons mentioned in the story. Here is the list we came up with: a man (the father), his two sons (a younger one and an older one), local inhabitants of the distant country, pigs, the father's hired men and servants, a calf which had been fattened, friends of the elder son, and loose women. Then we listened to the story again with these instructions: While listening to the story this time, think about each of these characters and then pick out the one which seems most like you at this time. Draw a circle around that name.

I invite you to do something similar. As you listen to a retelling of the story for the next few minutes, I invite you to think about these characters and then decide which one seems most like you at this time. The characters to pick from this morning are the younger son, the older son or the father.

So, we have two sons and a father. One son, the younger one of the two, is bold enough to ask his father for his inheritance. This request is the same as wishing his father dead -- When do we get an inheritance? When someone dies -- if there's an inheritance left. Have any of you seen the bumper sticker commonly seen on motor homes: "We're spending our children's inheritance."

But what does this father do? The story says, "the father divided the property between them." Not only does the father do the unthinkable, granting the younger son's request for the inheritance, the father also gives the older son his portion of the inheritance.

A few days after getting his inheritance the younger son went off to a distant country. He ran away. When I was a young adult a few decades ago, a young person may have run off to California or backpacked around Europe. For any young persons

who watch the television series "Everwood" on the WB, Ephraim, the older son, is currently taking his "inheritance" and running off to Europe.

After the younger son went away, he squandered the money and eventually had nothing left. He had nothing to eat and would have been willing to eat the food for pigs. Is pig food something you would want to dig into and eat? I think of stories of homeless people scrounging through dumpsters to find thrown away bits of food. This younger son becomes less than human.

When the younger son gets hungry enough he finally comes to his senses and thinks about his father's hired men who have more to eat than he does. He decides to return home, beg for his father's forgiveness and to take him back. The younger son does return home -- and before he even gets to the property line, his father sees him and runs out to him. Imagine yourself as this parent -- running out to your errant child. What would you do? I know my first questions would be (probably in an angry tone) "Where have you been?" and "What have you been doing?" This parent doesn't do that. This parent clasps his child in his arms and welcomes him home with a kiss. This loving welcome home is beautifully portrayed in this painting. Even when the younger son admits his errant ways, the father pays no attention. Instead he orders a party. He celebrates. He gives the son the best robe, puts a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet, kills the fatted calf and has a feast.

We need to pause here for a moment to clarify that not only fathers welcome home run away children. What about mothers? The mother of this story is not mentioned, yet where do you think she is? What do you think she is doing? I imagine that while washing dishes every night she's peering out the window hoping to catch a glimpse of her younger son walking down the road. What mother (at least in her heart) would not be out at the edge of the property longing for her child?

Henri Nouwen also saw the masculine and feminine characteristics of God portrayed in the hands of this painting -- the hands on the shoulders and back of this returning child. The left hand here looks broader, maybe a bit rougher. It looks more like what we think of as a man's hand. The right hand is narrower, the skin smoother, the fingers more slender. It looks more like what we think of as a woman's hand.

Now let's switch to the elder son. He's been working in the fields all day, all week, all week end. It's Sunday evening; he's still driving the tractor bringing in the harvest. He's exhausted. What does he hear? Music? coming from the machine shed? What are all the people doing here? What do you mean my brother has come home and we're having a party? I've been here at home since last harvest season when he left. I've done everything that's needed on this farm; fixed the machinery, gotten up in the dark and cold winter months to take care of the cattle, helped with the finances. What do you mean we're having a party for my younger brother?

I don't know how many of you relate to the elder son. When I first considered this story, I related to the elder son. I am the oldest of two daughters and have been super

responsible, doing whatever is expected of me. Henri Nouwen also related to the elder son, being the eldest in his family. He was also a Catholic priest, and taught at Notre Dame, Harvard and Yale. He was obedient to the church. Many of us in the church can relate to the elder son. We are responsible hard workers. We do what is expected of us. And we can be resentful when someone gets something which we think we should have.

Notice the elder son in the painting. Can you tell who he is? Notice how hard and stiff he looks. Notice the distance between him and his father. Even though he stayed home, the older brother is just as lost as his younger brother. He is as far away from his father as the younger child was when he ran away.

The story continues. "The elder son...was angry and refused to go into the party. His father came out and began to urge him to come in... The father said, "My son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours."

We don't know how the older son responded. We don't know if the elder son softened and went into the party or if he angrily turned around and stalked back into the night.

While we may like stories with nice neat endings, that is not the point of this story. Jesus used this story as his reply to the religious leaders when they grumbled that he welcomes sinners (tax collectors and prostitutes), that he eats with them. Today we may initially think of broken people as being homeless or having AIDS. However, the broken people may also be us, you and me. We are broken in any place we feel resentment or anger, any place we feel distant from God or from each other. These are the places where forgiveness is needed. Any place where we hurt or grieve is a place where God desires to welcome us home and help us heal.

Consider the broken parts of your life. Do you have a run away or difficult child? Do you hold a long time grudge against a brother, sister or neighbor? Maybe you struggle with alcoholism or depression. Maybe you have just received some disturbing news. What is God's response to us? Does God say, "You're fired?" Does God say, "Buck up and face reality?" No. God, the loving compassionate mother/father, welcomes us with open arms and says,

"My son, you are with me always. All I have is yours."

"My daughter, you are with me always. All I have is yours."

"My children, you are with me always. All I have is yours."

God only wishes and desires the best for us and warmly welcomes us home when we return.

Amen.