



The Return of the Prodigal Son by Henri J.M. Nouwen

Discussion questions for Groups

Church on the Corner 2018, Based on the material prepared by Ed Wojcicki and John Holsinger and Revised by Claire S. Merritt.

The Return of the Prodigal Son is among Rembrandt's final works, likely completed within two years of his death in 1669. Depicting the moment of the prodigal son's return to his father in the Biblical parable, it is a renowned work described by art historian Kenneth Clark as *"a picture which those who have seen the original in St. Petersburg may be forgiven for claiming as the greatest picture ever painted"*

Session 1

Prologue & Introduction.

The book is Henri Nouwen's personal reflections on the Rembrandt painting which hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia and the way it allows the parable of Jesus to speak in new ways. The Prologue and Introduction tell of Henri's encounter with the painting itself in 1986 and his move to the L'Arche Daybreak community. He hung a print of the painting in his new community, and he reflected over time on how he had been the younger (prodigal) son, the elder son and the father in the Gospel story. What struck him like a thunderbolt though, was a friend's challenge: "Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you are called to be the father". The book is both autobiographical and a call to the sometimes lonely and challenging role of spiritual fatherhood.

An important word about masculine and inclusive language; while the three main characters in the prodigal son story are all men, Henri is careful in this book to point out how the spiritual characteristics that he describes – even the call to be a better father – are applicable to both men and women. Rembrandt died when he was 63 years old. Nouwen, a fellow Dutchman, died four years after this book came out. He was 64.

Discussion questions – Week 1.

1. Rembrandt's painting had a profound and lasting effect on Henri. What work of art – painting, novel, film, poem, music– has touched you deeply? Why?
2. Nouwen suggests that “accepting love, forgiveness and healing is often much harder than giving” love and forgiveness. Why do you think this is true for Henri? If this is true for you also, what keeps you from accepting love, forgiveness and healing?
3. In describing his spiritual struggle Henri says: “I am called to enter into the inner sanctuary of my own being where God has chosen to dwell.” He adds: “The only way to that place is prayer, unceasing prayer” (page 15 hc/18sc). What does he mean by this “inner sanctuary” and why is it so hard to reach this and to stay there?
4. Over the course of several years Henri identified in turn with each of the three main figures in Rembrandt's painting: first the younger son, then the elder son and finally the father. How does he justify each identification? To which figure do you feel the greatest affinity? Why?
5. How do you feel about Henri's suggestion that we might be at different times all the characters in this story? In what ways are you challenged in different ways by it?