



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

Study 4 - The Father (Chapters 7-9)

Themes:

Nouwen says the painting just as easily could have been called “The Welcome by the Compassionate Father.” In the painting, the father’s hands are the true central point. The light and the eyes of others focus on those hands. The left hand is masculine while the right hand is more feminine. So the character “is mother as well as father” – welcoming, holding and caressing the son. The painting is about the father’s love for both of his sons. Many people live with secret feelings that they are not worthy of love, or they wonder whether others truly love them. Nouwen felt that way – he rarely felt or experienced the intimacy that he wrote about so often. He suffered from loneliness. The father of the prodigal son though, invites us to experience joy which can be more difficult than experiencing sadness or frustration. Joy, like gratitude, is a choice. “It requires choosing for the light even when there is much darkness to frighten me, choosing for life even when the forces of death are so visible, and choosing for the truth even when I am surrounded by lies” (page 108 hc/115 sc).

Discussion questions:

According to Henri, God’s “only desire is to bless”. How does Rembrandt convey this sense of blessing in his painting? When in your life have you felt especially blessed?

Look at the hands, the central point of the painting. The left hand is strong and muscular (page 93 hc/98 sc). The right hand is refined, soft and very tender. The left hand touches and holds; the right hand comforts and consoles. What meaning does Henri see in the differences between these hands? How does this change your understanding of the parable?

Henri asks: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to make God smile by giving God the chance to find me and love me lavishly?. What are you doing to open yourself to God’s love? Why is this often difficult? When have you felt unworthy of God’s love?”

According to Henri: “Celebration belongs to God’s Kingdom. God not only offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing, but wants to lift up these gifts as a source of joy for all who witness them”. How does this statement affect how you see God? When in your life have you felt great joy? What can you do to find joy in the little things of everyday life?

Given all the darkness in our world there is much temptation to be cynical. When are you inclined toward cynicism? How do you respond to people who are perpetually cynical?

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