



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

Conclusion and Epilogue Becoming the Father” and Living the Painting

Themes:

We are called to be as compassionate as God is compassionate. We are called to follow Jesus’ example as a son – “the younger son without being rebellious” and “the elder son without being resentful.” We are also called to grow into spiritual fatherhood – this means both father and mother, masculine and feminine. All of that is easy to say but very difficult to live. To be compassionate means we do not compare ourselves to others and we are not competitive either, Henri says. He finds three major traits in a compassionate father: grief (“the discipline of the heart that sees the sins of the world”, forgiveness, and generosity. The father said to the elder son: “All I have is yours,” and Henri adds: “There is nothing the father keeps for himself. He pours himself out for his sons”. Henri adds to his description of spiritual fatherhood “the radical discipline of being home.” There is something foundational about the father being home, where the father waits and the transformation from son to father that takes place in an individual. Nouwen admits that he spent time as the rebellious young son in search of a home, which he found at L’Arche Daybreak, and also spent time feeling as angry and alienated as the elder son. He says few people actually claim spiritual fatherhood for themselves because “the pains are too obvious, the joys too hidden”. Henri ultimately relates to the “bent-over old father” who is poised “to stretch out to all who suffer, to rest upon the shoulders of all who come, and to offer the blessing that emerges from the immensity of God’s love”.

Discussion questions:

Henri asks: “Hasn’t the Church in the past stressed obedience in a fashion that made it hard to claim spiritual fatherhood, and hasn’t our consumer society encouraged us to indulge in

childish self-gratification”. Where in your life have you felt this kind of pressure and how have you responded to it?

In what ways do you “remain subject to . . . competitive ways” of the world and “expect to be rewarded for all the good” you did? How can you move beyond this to become the father or mother Henri says we are called to be?

Henri names “three ways to a truly compassionate fatherhood: grief, forgiveness, and generosity”. What does he mean by each of these disciplines? Why are they so difficult?

2. How do you respond to Henri’s challenging, almost chilling words that spiritual fatherhood involves loneliness and a “dreadful yet fruitful emptiness”? Henri explains: “That same dreadful emptiness is also the place of true freedom. It is the place where there is nothing left to lose, where love has no strings attached, and where real spiritual strength is found. . . . I know that I can welcome anyone there without condemnation and offer hope. There I am free to receive the burdens of others without any need to evaluate, categorize, or analyze. There, in that completely non-judgmental state of being, I can engender liberating trust”. If you know persons who have attained this spiritual state, describe them. How do you feel about them? What do you think enabled them to reach this state of development?

In what ways do you wish you were able to be more like the father in the Gospel story?

“Rembrandt portrays the father as the man who has transcended the ways of his children. His own loneliness and anger may have been there, but they have been transformed by suffering and tears. His loneliness has become endless solitude, his anger boundless gratitude. This is who I have to become. I see it as clearly as I see the immense beauty of the father’s emptiness and compassion. Can I let the younger and the elder son grow in me to the maturity of the compassionate father?”. How do you answer Henri’s question for yourself? What are you moving from? What are you moving to? What step or steps can you take to make this movement?