

# FROM THE PASTOR'S



Fourth Sunday of Lent – March 18, 2007 C

## THE REFLECTIONS ON TWO WAYWARD SONS AND A COMPASSIONATE FATHER.

The late Fr. Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest and teacher at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard, has been one of the popular writers of our time not only for Catholics but also for non-Catholics. The following are some excerpts from his bestselling book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The book is not only a very insightful reflection on Rembrandt's famous painting on this story, but it also offers spiritually moving insights on this most famous parable. The following are some excerpts:

### *Reflections on the Prodigal Son*

*Leaving home is, then, much more than a historical event bound to time and place. It is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being, that God holds me safe in an eternal embrace, that I am indeed carved in the palms of God's hands and hidden in their shadows. Leaving home means ignoring the truth that God has "fashioned me in secret, molded me in the depths of the earth and knitted me together in my mother's womb." Leaving home is living as though I do not yet have a home and must look far and wide to find one.*

Nouwen wonders how we could leave home, leave the place when God calls us Beloved son/daughter.

*At first this sounds unbelievable. Why should I leave the place where all I need to hear can be heard? The more I think about this question, the more I realize that the true voice of love is a very soft and gentle voice speaking to me in the most hidden places of my being. It is not a boisterous voice, forcing itself on me and demanding attention. It is the voice of a nearly blind father who has cried much and died many deaths. It is a voice that can only be heard by those who allow themselves to be touched. . .*

*But there are many other voices, voices that are loud, full of promises and very seductive. These voices say, "Go out and prove that you are worth something." Soon after Jesus had heard the voice calling him the Beloved, he was led to the desert to hear those other voices. They told him to prove that he was worth love in being successful, popular, and powerful. Those same voices are not unfamiliar to me. They are always there and, always, they reach into those inner places where I question my own goodness and doubt my self-worth. They suggest that I am not going to be loved without my having earned it through determined efforts and hard work. They want me to prove to myself and others that I am worth being loved, and they keep pushing me to do everything possible to gain*

*acceptance. They deny loudly that love is a totally free gift. I leave home every time I lose faith in the voice that calls me the Beloved and follow the voices that offer a great variety of ways to win the love I so much desire.*

### *Addiction as a form of lostness*

*"Addiction" might be the best word to explain the lostness that so deeply permeates contemporary society. Our addictions make us cling to what the world proclaims as the keys to self-fulfillment: accumulation of wealth and power; attainment of status and admiration; lavish consumption of food and drink, and sexual gratification without distinguishing between lust and love. These addictions create expectations that cannot but fail to satisfy our deepest needs. As long as we live within the world's delusions, our addictions condemn us to futile quests in "the distant country," leaving us to face an endless series of disillusionments while our sense of self remains unfulfilled. In these days of increasing addictions, we have wandered far away from our Father's home. The addicted life can aptly be designated a life lived in "a distant country." It is from there that our cry for deliverance rises up.*

*I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found. Why do I keep ignoring the place of true love and persist in looking for it elsewhere? Why do I keep leaving home where I am called a child of God, the Beloved of my Father? I am constantly surprised at how I keep taking the gifts God has given me—my health, my intellectual and emotional gifts—and keep using them to impress people, receive affirmation and praise, and compete for rewards, instead of developing them for the glory of God. Yes, I often carry them off to a "distant country" and put them in the service of an exploiting world that does not know their true value. It's almost as if I want to prove to myself and to my world that I do not need God's love, that I can make a life on my own, that I want to be fully independent. Beneath it all is the great rebellion, the radical "No" to the Father's love, the unspoken curse: "I wish you were dead." The prodigal son's "No" reflects Adam's original rebellion" his rejection of the God in whose love we are created and by whose love we are sustained. It is the rebellion that places me outside the garden, out of reach of the tree of life. It is the rebellion that makes me dissipate myself in a "distant country."*

### *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

*The prodigal's return is full of ambiguities. He is traveling in the right direction, but what confusion! He*

*admits that he was unable to make it on his own and confesses that he would get better treatment as a slave in his father's home than as an outcast in a foreign land, but he is still far from trusting his father's love. He knows that he is still the son, but tells himself that he has lost the dignity to be called "son," and he prepares himself to accept the status of a "hired man" so that he will at least survive. There is repentance, but not a rep*

*It is a self-serving repentance that offers the possibility of survival. I know this state of mind and heart quite well. It is like saying: "Well, I couldn't make it on my own, I have to acknowledge that God is the only resource left to me. I will go to God and ask for forgiveness in the hope that I will receive a minimal punishment and be allowed to survive on the condition of hard labor." God remains a harsh, judgmental God. It is this God who makes me feel guilty and worried and calls up in me all these self-serving apologies. Submission to this God does not create true inner freedom, but breeds only bitterness and resentment.*

*One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness. There is something in us humans that keeps us clinging to our sins and prevents us from letting God erase our past and offer us a completely new beginning. Sometimes it even seems as though I want to prove to God that my darkness is too great to overcome. While God wants to restore me to the full dignity of sonship, I keep insisting that I will settle for being a hired servant. But do I truly want to be restored to the full responsibility of the Son? Do I truly want to be so totally forgiven that a completely new way of living becomes possible? Do I trust myself and such a radical reclamation? Do I want to break away from my deep-rooted rebellion against God and surrender myself so absolutely to God's love that a new person can emerge? Receiving forgiveness requires a total willingness to let God be God and do all the healing, restoring, and renewing. As long as I want to do even a part of that myself, I end up with partial solutions, such as becoming a hired servant. As a hired servant, I can still keep my distance, still revolt, reject, strike, run away, or complain about my pay. As the beloved son, I have to claim my full dignity and begin preparing myself to become the father.*

### **The Elder Son**

*The lostness of the elder son, however, is much harder to identify. After all, he did all the right things. He was obedient, dutiful, law-abiding, and hardworking. People respected him, admired him, praised him, and likely considered him a model son. Outwardly, the elder son was faultless. But when confronted by his father's joy at the return of his younger brother, a dark power erupts in him and boils to the surface. Suddenly, there becomes glaringly visible a resentful, proud, unkind, selfish person, one that had remained deeply hidden, even though it had been growing stronger and more powerful over the years.*

*Looking deeply into myself and then around me at the*

*lives of other people, I wonder which does more damage, lust or resentment? There is so much resentment among the "just" and the "righteous." There is so much judgment, condemnation, and prejudice among the "saints." There is so much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding "sin."*

*The lostness of the resentful "saint" is so hard to reach precisely because it is so closely wedded to the desire to be good and virtuous. I know, from my own life, how diligently I have tried to be good, acceptable, likeable, and worthy example for others. There was always the conscious effort to avoid the pitfalls of sin and the constant fear of giving in to temptation. But with all of that there came a seriousness, a moralistic intensity—and even a touch of fanaticism—that made it increasingly difficult to feel at home in my Father's house. I became less free, less spontaneous, less playful, and others came to see me more and more as a somewhat "heavy" person.*

*When I listen carefully to the words with which the elder son attacks his father—self-righteous, self-pitying, jealous words—I hear a deeper complaint. It is the complaint that comes from a heart that feels it never received what it was due. It is the complaint expressed in countless subtle and not-so subtle ways, forming a bedrock of human resentment. It is the complaint that cries out: "I tried so hard, worked so long, did so much, and still I have not received what others get so easily. Why do people not thank me, not invite me, not play with me, not honor me, while they pay so much attention to those who take life so easily and so casually?"*

A part of the elder son's problem is that he felt himself less loved and less appreciated than the younger son. Nouwen writes:

*This affectionate approach becomes even clearer in the words that follow. The harsh and bitter reproaches of the son are not met with words of judgment. There is no recrimination or accusation. The father does not defend himself or even comment on the elder son's behavior. The father moves directly beyond all evaluations to stress his intimate relationship with his son when he says: "You are with me always." The father's declaration of unqualified love eliminates any possibility that the younger son is more loved than the elder. The elder son has never left the house. The father has shared everything with him. He has made him part of his daily life, keeping nothing from him. "All I have is yours," he says. There could be no clearer statement of the father's unlimited love for his elder son. Thus the father's unreserved, unlimited love is offered wholly and equally to both his sons.*

*As long as I (like the elder brother) stay outside in the darkness, I can only remain in the resentful complaint that results from my comparisons. Outside of the light, my younger brother seems to be more loved by the Father than I; in fact, outside of the light, I cannot even see him as my own brother.*

*God is urging me to come home, to enter into his light, and to discover there that, in God, all people are uniquely and completely loved. In the light of God I can finally see my neighbor as my brother, as the one who belongs as much to God as I do. But outside of God's house, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, lovers and friends become rivals and even enemies; each perpetually plagued by jealousies, suspicions, and resentments.*

### *An Open-Ended Question*

*Neither Rembrandt's painting nor the parable it portrays tells us about the elder son's final willingness to let himself be found. Is the elder son willing to confess that he, too, is a sinner in need of forgiveness? Is he willing to acknowledge that he is not better than his brother?*

*I am left alone with these questions. Just as I do not know how the younger son accepted the celebration or how he lived with his father after his return, I also do not know whether the elder son ever reconciled himself with his brother, his father, or himself. What I do know with unwavering certainty is the heart of the father. It is a heart of limitless mercy.*

*Unlike a fairy tale, the parable provides no happy ending. Instead, it leaves us face to face with one of life's hardest spiritual choices: to trust or not to trust in God's all-forgiving love. I myself am the only one who can make that choice. In response to their complaint, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them," Jesus confronted the Pharisees and scribes not only with the return of the prodigal son, but also with the resentful elder son. It must have come as a shock to these dutiful religious people they finally had to face their own complaint and choose how they would respond to God's love for the sinners. Would they be willing to join them at the table as Jesus did? It was and still is a real challenge: for them, for me, for every human being who is caught in resentment and tempted to settle on a complaintive way of life.*

*The more I reflect on the elder son in me, the more I realize how deeply rooted this form of lostness really is and how hard it is to return home from there. Returning home from a lustful escapade seems so much easier than returning home from a cold anger that has rooted itself in the deepest corners of my being. My resentment is not something that can be easily distinguished and dealt with rationally.*

*It is far more pernicious: something that has attached itself to the underside of my virtue. Isn't it good to be obedient, dutiful, law-abiding, hardworking, and self-sacrificing? And still it seems that my resentments and complaints are mysteriously tied to such praiseworthy attitudes.*

### **The Compassionate and Loving Father**

*The heart of the father burns with an immense desire to bring his children home. Oh, how much would he have*

*liked to talk to them, to warn them against the many dangers they were facing, and to convince them that at home can be found everything that they search for elsewhere. How much would he have liked to pull them back with his fatherly authority and hold them close to himself so that they would not get hurt?*

*But his love is too great to do any of that. It cannot force, constrain, push, or pull. It offers the freedom to reject that love or to love in return. It is precisely the immensity of the divine love that is the source of the divine suffering. God, creator of heaven and earth, has chosen to be, first and foremost, a Father.*

*As father, he wants his children to be free, free to love. That freedom includes the possibility of their leaving home, going to a "distant country," and losing everything. The Father's heart knows all the pain that will come from that choice, but his love makes him powerless to prevent it. As Father, he desires that those who stay at home enjoy his presence and experience his affection. But here again, he wants only to offer a love that can be freely received. He suffers beyond telling when his children honor him only with lip service, while their hearts are far from him. He knows their "deceitful tongues" and "disloyal hearts," but he cannot make them love him without losing his true fatherhood.*

*As Father, the only authority he claims for himself is the authority of compassion. That authority comes from letting the sins of his children pierce his heart. There is no lust, greed, anger, resentment, jealousy, or vengeance in his lost children that has not caused immense grief to his heart. The grief is so deep because the heart is so pure. From the deep inner place where love embraces all human grief, the Father reaches out to his children. The touch of his hands, radiating inner light, seeks only to heal. . .*

*The true center of Rembrandt's painting is the hands of the father. On them all the light is concentrated; on them the eyes of the bystanders are focused; in them mercy becomes flesh; upon them forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing come together, and, through them, not only the tired son, but also the worn-out father find their rest. From the moment I first saw the poster on Simone's office door, I felt drawn to those hands. I did not fully understand why. But gradually over the years I have come to know those hands. They have held me from the hour of my conception, they welcomed me at my birth, held me close to my mother's breast, fed me, and kept me warm. They have protected me in times of danger and consoled me in times of grief. They have waved me good-bye and always welcomed me back. Those hands are God's hands. They are also the hands of my parents, teachers, friends, healers, and all those whom God has given me to remind me how safely I am held.*

### **Do I want to be the Compassionate Father**

The final chapter of Nouwen's book is called *Becoming the Father*. One of Jesus' most challenging exhortations is: "be compassionate as your Father is compassionate".

Nouwen writes:

*God's compassion is described by Jesus not simply to show me how willing God is to feel for me, or to forgive me my sins and offer me new life and happiness, but to invite me to become like God and to show the same compassion to others as he is showing to me. If the only meaning of the story were that people sin but God forgives, I could easily begin to think of my sins as a fine occasion for God to show me his forgiveness. There would be no real challenge in such an interpretation. I would resign myself to my weaknesses and keep hoping that eventually God would close his eyes to them and let me come home, whatever I did. Such sentimental romanticism is not the message of the Gospels.*

*This call to become the Father precludes any "soft" interpretation of the story. I know how much I long to return and be held safe, but do I really want to be son and heir with all that that implies? Being in the Father's house requires that I make the Father's life my own and become transformed in his image.*

*Having lived my sonship to its fullest, the time has come to step over all barriers and claim the truth that becoming the old man in front of me is all I really desire for myself. I cannot remain a child forever, I cannot keep pointing to my father as an excuse for my life. I have to dare to stretch out my own hands in blessing and to receive with ultimate compassion my children, regardless of how they feel or think about me. Becoming the compassionate Father is the ultimate goal of the spiritual life, as it is expressed in the parable as well as in Rembrandt's painting, I now need to explore its full significance.*

**Lenten Penance Service this Tuesday, March 20th  
at 4:00 PM and 7:00 PM**

I realize that sometimes we are not aware of our sins. Nearly all of us, including myself, suffer from spiritual blindness. Hence, the need for that excellent one-liner prayer: "Holy Spirit show me where there is sin in our lives." My confession sometimes is "Lord forgive me for my sins, the ones I'm aware of and the ones I am not aware of.

### **Intercessory Prayer**

Hopefully in the weeks ahead I will learn more about intercessory prayer and perhaps you will also and share with me. In the meantime, we will act on what we know. Intercessory prayer is praying for needs other than my own, often called the prayer of petition.

At this time I have **three needs** which I would appreciate you including in your prayers.

- The **Men's Retreat** next weekend. That all those who are signed up will in fact come and that the Holy Spirit will anoint the team and retreatants with his blessings.
- Our **Faith Formation Day** next Saturday. That many will come and that it will be a blessing for all who do.
- **Youth Ministry**. At this time we are engaged in a national search for an experienced and faith-filled *Youth Minister*. Please pray a lot that the Holy Spirit will send us a dynamic faith-filled youth minister.

### **Interested in being a prayer warrior for our Parish?**

At this time I am seeking to draw up a list of parishioners who would be willing to be a prayer warrior/intercessor for the ministries and needs of our parish.

**Qualifications:** Willingness. Remember what I said last weekend in my homily: "God calls not the worthy but the willing." Are you one of the willing? If yes:

**Job Description:** Pray for the needs we place before you like the three intercessions above. When does your new job begin? Today. Let me know by email or phone or place this slip in the collect basket.

**Yes, Fr. Tobin, I am willing to be a Prayer Warrior for the ministries of Ascension Parish.**

Have a blessed week,

