THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SONHENRI NOUWE

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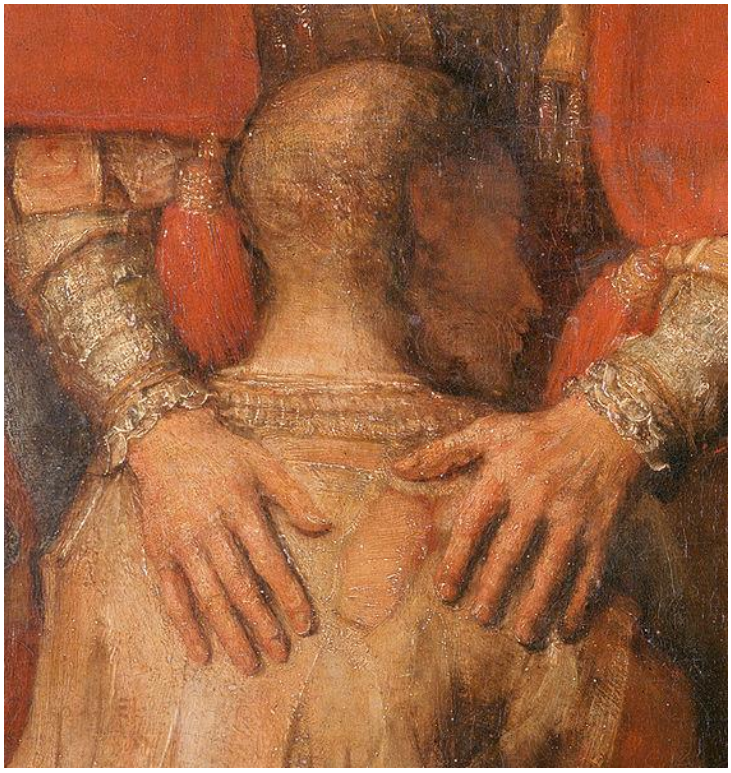
THE FATHER

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him . . . the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.



… 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. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found."

REMBRANDT AND THE FATHER

While I was sitting in front of the painting in the Hermitage trying to absorb what I saw, many groups of tourists passed by. Even though they spent less than a minute with the painting, almost all of the guides described it as a painting of the compassionate father, and most of them mentioned that it was one of Rembrandt's last paintings, one to which he came only after a life of suffering. Indeed, this is what this painting is all about. It is the human expression of divine compassion.

Instead of its being called *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* it could easily have been called "The Welcome by the Compassionate Father." The emphasis is less on the son than on the father. The parable is in truth a "Parable of the Father's Love." Looking at the way in which Rembrandt portrays the father, there came to me a whole new interior understanding of tenderness, mercy, and forgiveness. Seldom, if ever, has God's immense, compassionate love been expressed in such a poignant way. Every detail of the father's figure his facial expression, his posture, the colours of his

dress, and, most of all, the still gesture of his hands-speaks of the divine love for humanity that existed from the beginning and ever will be.

Everything comes together here: Rembrandt's story, humanity's story, and God's story. Time and eternity intersect; approaching death and everlasting life touch each other. Sin and forgiveness embrace; the human and the divine become one.

What gives Rembrandt's portrayal of the father such an irresistible power is that the most divine is captured in the most human. I see a half-blind old man with a moustache and a parted beard, dressed in a gold-embroidered garment and a deep red cloak, laying his large, stiffened hands on the shoulders of his returning son. This is very specific, concrete, and describable.

I also see, however, infinite compassion, unconditional love, everlasting forgiveness-divine realities-emanating from a Father who is the creator of the universe. Here, both the human and the divine, the fragile and the powerful, the old and the eternally young are fully expressed. This is Rembrandt's genius. The spiritual truth is completely enfleshed. As Paul Baudiquet writes: "The spiritual in Rembrandt… pulls its strongest and most splendid accents from the flesh."

It is of special significance that Rembrandt chose a nearly blind old man to communicate God's love. Surely the parable Jesus told and the way the parable has been interpreted throughout the centuries offer the main basis for the portrayal of God's merciful love. But I should not forget that it was Rembrandt' s own story that enabled him to give it its unique expression.

Paul Baudiquet says: "Since his youth, Rembrandt has had but one vocation: to grow old." And it is true that Rembrandt always displayed a great interest in older people. He had drawn them, etched them, and painted them ever since he was a young man and became increasingly fascinated by their inner beauty. Some of Rembrandt's most stunning portraits are of old people, and his most gripping self-portraits are made during his last years.

After his many trials at home and at work, he shows a special fascination with blind people. As the light in his work interiorizes, he begins to paint blind people as the real seers. He is attracted to Tobit and the near-blind Simeon, and he paints them several times.

As Rembrandt's own life moves toward the shadows of old age, as his success wanes, and the exterior splendour of his life diminishes, he comes more in touch with the immense beauty of the interior life. There he discovers the light that comes from an inner fire that never dies: the fire of love. His art no longer tries to "grasp, conquer, and regulate the visible," but to "transform the visible in the fire of love that comes from the unique heart of the artist."

The unique heart of Rembrandt becomes the unique heart of the father. The inner, light-giving fire of love that has grown strong through the artist's many years of suffering burns in the heart of the father who welcomes his returning son.

I understand now why Rembrandt didn't follow the literal text of the parable. There St. Luke writes: "While the younger son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him." Earlier in his life, Rembrandt had etched and drawn this event with all the dramatic movement it contains. But as he approached death, Rembrandt chose to portray a very still father who recognizes his son, not with the eyes of the body, but with the inner eye of his heart.

It seems that the hands that touch the back of the returning son are the instruments of the father's inner eye. The near-blind father sees far and wide. His seeing is an eternal seeing, a seeing that reaches out to all of humanity. It is a seeing that understands the lostness of women and men of all times and places, that knows with immense compassion the suffering of those who have chosen to leave home, that cried oceans of tears as they got caught in anguish and agony.

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 dose 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 honour 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.

Here is the God I want to believe in: a Father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their shoulders. His only desire is to bless.

In Latin, to bless is *benedicere*, which means literally: saying good things. The Father wants to say, more with his touch than with his voice, good things of his children. He has no desire to punish them. They have already been punished excessively by their own inner or outer waywardness. The Father wants simply to let them know that the love they have searched for in such distorted ways has been, is, and always will be there for them. The Father wants to say, more with his hands than with his mouth: "You are my Beloved, on you my favour rests." He is the shepherd, "feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast."

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 dose 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.

Not long after Rembrandt painted the father and his blessing hands, he died.

Rembrandt's hands had painted countless human faces and human hands. In this, one of his last paintings, he painted the face and the hands of God. Who had posed for this life-size portrait of God? Rembrandt himself?

The father of the prodigal son *is* a self-portrait, but not in the traditional sense. Rembrandt's own face appears in several of his paintings. It appears as the prodigal son in the brothel, as a frightened disciple on the lake, as one of the men taking the dead body of Jesus from the cross.

Yet here it is not Rembrandt's face that is reflected, but his soul, the soul of a father who had suffered so many a death. During his sixty-three years, Rembrandt saw not only his dear wife Saskia die, but also three sons, two daughters, and the two women with whom he lived. The grief for his beloved son Titus, who died at the age of twenty-six shortly after his marriage, has never been descrybed, but in the father of the *Prodigal San* we can see how many tears it must have cost him. Created in the image of God, Rembrandt had come to discover through his long, painful struggle the true nature of that image. It is the image of a near-blind old man crying tenderly, blessing his deeply wounded son. Rembrandt was the son, he became the father, and thus was made ready to enter eternal life.

THE FATHER WELCOMES HOME

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him [his younger son and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him... His father came out and began to urge him (his elder son) to come in.

Father and Mother

Often I have asked friends to give me their first impression of Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son.* Inevitably, they point to the wise old man who forgives his son: the benevolent patriarch.

The longer I looked at "the patriarch," the dearer it became to me that Rembrandt had done something quite different from letting God pose as the wise old head of a family. It all began with the hands. The two are quite different. The father's left hand touching the son's shoulder is strong and muscular. The fingers are spread out and cover a large part of the prodigal son's shoulder and back. I can see a certain pressure, especially in the thumb. That hand seems not only to touch, but, with its strength, also to hold. Even though there is a gentleness in the way the father's left hand touches his son, it is not without a firm grip.

How different is the father's right hand! This hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft, and very tender. The fingers are dose to each other and they have an elegant quality. It lies gently upon the son's shoulder. It wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother's hand.

Some commentators have suggested that the masculine left hand is Rembrandt' s own hand, while the feminine right hand is similar to the right hand of *The Jewish Bride* painted in the same period. I like to believe that this is true.

As soon as I recognized the difference between the two hands of the father, a new world of meaning opened up for me. The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand. He holds, and she caresses. He confirms and she consoles. He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present. That gentle caressing right hand echoes for me the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her baby at the breast, feel no pity for the child she has home? Even if these were to forget, I shall not forget you. Look, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands."

My friend Richard White pointed out to me that the caressing feminine hand of the father parallels the bare, wounded foot of the son, while the strong masculine hand parallels the foot dressed in a sandal. Is it too much to think that the one hand protects the vulnerable side of the son, while the other hand reinforces the son's strength and desire to get on with his life?

Then there is the great red cloak. With its warm colour and its arch-like shape, it offers a welcome place where it is good to be. At first, the cloak covering the bent-over body of the father looked to me like a tent inviting the tired traveller to find some rest. But as I went on gazing at the red cloak, another image, stronger than that of a tent, came to me: the sheltering wings of the mother bird. They reminded me of Jesus' words about God's maternal love: ''Jerusalem, Jerusalem … How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you refused!"

Day and night God holds me safe, as a hen holds her chicks secure under her wings. Even more than that of a tent, the image of a vigilant mother bird's wings expresses the safety that God offers her children. They express care, protection, a place to rest and feel safe.

Every time I look at the tent-like and wings-like cloak in Rembrandt's painting, I sense the motherly quality of God's love and my heart begins to sing in words inspired by the Psalmist:

You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High and abide in the shade of the Almighty say to your God: "My refuge, my stronghold, my God in whom I trust!... You conceal me with your pinions and under your wings I shall find refuge."

And so, under the aspect of an old Jewish patriarch, there emerges also a motherly God receiving her son home.

As I now look again at Rembrandt's old man bending over his returning son and touching his shoulders with his hands, I begin to see not only a father who "clasps his son in his arms," but also a mother who caresses her child, surrounds him with the warmth of her body, and holds him against the womb from which he sprang. Thus the "return of the prodigal son" becomes the return to God's womb, the return to the very origins of being and again echoes Jesus' exhortation to Nicodemus, to be reborn from above.

Now I understand better also the enormous stillness of this portrait of God. There is no sentimentality here, no romanticism, no simplistic tale with a happy ending. What I see here is God as mother, receiving back into her womb the one whom she made in her own image. The near-blind eyes, the hands, the cloak, the bent over body, they all call forth the divine maternal love, marked by grief, desire, hope, and endless waiting.

The mystery, indeed, is that God in her infinite compassion has linked herself for eternity with the life of her children. She has freely chosen to become dependent on her creatures, whom she has gifted with freedom. This choice causes her grief when they leave; this choice brings her gladness when they return. But her joy will not be complete until all who have received life from her have returned home and gather together around the table prepared for them.

And this includes the elder son. Rembrandt places him at a distance, out from under the billowing cloak, at the edge of the circle of light. The elder son's dilemma is to accept or reject that his father' s love is beyond comparisons; to dare to be loved as his father longs to love him or to insist on being loved as *he* feels he ought to be loved. The father knows that the choice must be the son's, even while he waits with outstretched hands. Will the elder son be willing to kneel and be touched by the same hands that touch his younger brother? Will he be willing to be forgiven and to experience the healing presence of the father who loves him beyond compare? Luke's story makes it very clear that the father goes out to both of his children. Not only does he run out to welcome the younger wayward son, but he comes out also to meet the elder, dutiful son as he returns from the fields wondering what the music and dancing are all about and urges him to come in.

No More or Less

It is very important for me to understand the full meaning of what is happening here. While the father is truly filled with joy at his younger son's return, he has not forgotten the elder. He doesn't take his elder son for granted. His joy was so intense that he couldn't wait to start celebrating, but as soon as he became aware of his elder son's arrival, he left the party, went out to him, and pleaded with him to join them.

In his jealousy and bitterness, the elder son can only see that his irresponsible brother is receiving more attention than he himself, and concludes that he is the less loved of the two. His father's heart, however, is not divided into more or less. The father's free and spontaneous response to his younger son's return does not involve any comparisons with his elder son. To the contrary, he ardently desires to make his elder son part of his joy.

This is not easy for me to grasp. In a world that constantly compares people, ranking them as more or less intelligent, more or less attractive, more or less successful, it is not easy to really

believe in a love that does not do the same. When I hear someone praised, it is hard not to think of myself as less praiseworthy; when I read about the goodness and kindness of other people, it is hard not to wonder whether I myself am as good and kind as they; and when I see trophies, rewards, and prizes being handed out to special people, I cannot avoid asking myself why that didn't happen to me.

The world in which I have grown up is a world so full of grades, scores, and statistics that, consciously or unconsciously, I always try to take my measure against all the others. Much sadness and gladness in my life flows directly from my comparing, and most, if not all, of this comparing is useless and a terrible waste of time and energy.

Our God, who is both Father and Mother to us, does not compare. Never. Even though I know in my head that this is true, it is still very hard to fully accept it with my whole being. When I hear someone called a favourite son or daughter, my immediate response is that the other children must be less appreciated, or less loved. I cannot fathom how all of God's children can be favourites. And still, they are. When I look from my place in the world into God's Kingdom, I quickly come to think of God as the keeper of some great celestial scoreboard, and I will always be afraid of not making the grade. But as soon as I look from God's welcoming home into the world, I discover that God loves with a divine love, a love that cedes to all women and men their uniqueness without ever comparing.

The elder brother compares himself with the younger one and becomes jealous. But the father loves them both so much that it didn't even occur to him to delay the party in order to prevent the elder son from feeling rejected. I am convinced that many of my emotional problems would melt as snow in the sun if I could let the truth of God's motherly non-comparing love permeate my heart.

How hard that is becomes clear when I reflect on the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. Each time I read that parable in which the landowner gives as much to the workers who worked only one hour as to those who did "a heavy day's work in all the heat," a feeling of irritation still wells up inside of me.

Why didn't the landowner pay those who worked many long hours first and then surprise the latecomers with his generosity? Why, instead, does he pay the workers of the eleventh hour first, raising false expectations in the others and creating unnecessary bitterness and jealousy? These questions, I now realize, come from a perspective that is all too willing to impose the economy of the temporal on the unique order of the divine.

It hadn't previously occurred to me that the landowner might have wanted the workers of the early hours to rejoice in his generosity to the latecomers. It never crossed my mind that he might have acted on the supposition that those who had worked in the vineyard the whole day would be deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to do work for their boss, and even more grateful to see what a generous man he is. It requires an interior about-face to accept such a non-comparing way of thinking. But that is God's way of thinking. God looks at his people as children of a family who are happy that those who have done only a little bit are as much loved as those who accomplish much.

God is so naive as to think that there would be great rejoicing when all those who spent time in his vineyard, whether a short time or a long time, were given the same attention. Indeed, he was so naive as to expect that they would all be so happy to be in his presence that comparing themselves with each other wouldn't even occur to them. That is why he says with the bewilderment of a misunderstood lover: "Why should you be envious because I am generous?" He could have said: "You have been with me the whole day, and I gave you all you asked for! Why are you so bitter?" It is the same bewilderment that comes from the heart of the father when he says to his jealous son: "My son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours."

Here lies bidden the great call to conversion: to look not with the eyes of my own low self-esteem, but with the eyes of God's love. As long as I keep looking at God as a landowner, as a father who wants to get the most out of me for the least cost, I cannot but become jealous, bitter, and resentful toward my fellow workers or my brothers and sisters. But if I am able to look at the world with the eyes of God's love and discover that God's vision is not that of a stereotypical

landowner or patriarch but rather that of an all-giving and forgiving father who does not measure out his love to his children according to how well they behave, then I quickly see that my only true response can be deep gratitude.

The Heart of God

In Rembrandt's painting, the elder son simply observes. It is difficult to imagine what is going on in his heart. Just as with the parable, so also with the painting, I am left with the question: How will he respond to the invitation to join the celebration?

There is no doubt-in the parable or the painting-about the father's heart. His heart goes out to both of his sons; he loves them both; he hopes to see them together as brothers around the same table; he wants them to experience that, different as they are, they belong to the same household and are children of the same father.

As I let all of this sink in, I see how the story of the father and his lost sons powerfully affirms that it was not I who chose God, but God who first chose me. This is the great mystery of our faith. We do not choose God, God chooses us. From all eternity we are bidden "in the shadow of God's hand" and "engraved on his palm." Before any human being touches us, God "forms us in secret" and "textures us" in the depth of the earth, and before any human being decides about us, God "knits us together in our mother's womb." God loves us before any human person can show love to us. He loves us with a "first" love, an unlimited, unconditional love, wants us to be his beloved children, and tells us to become as loving as himself.

For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life - pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures - and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was dose to despair.

Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not "How am I to find God?" but "How am I to let myself be found by him?" The question is not "How am I to know God?" but "How am I to let myself be known by God?" And, finally, the question is not "How am I to love God?" but "How am I to let myself be loved by God?" God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home. In all three parables which Jesus tel1s in response to the question of why he eats with sinners, he puts the emphasis on God's initiative. God is the shepherd who goes looking for his lost sheep. God is the woman who lights a lamp, sweeps out the house, and searches everywhere for her lost coin until she has found it. God is the father who watches and waits for his children, runs out to meet them, embraces them, pleads with them, begs and urges them to come home.

It might sound strange, but God wants to find me as much as, if not more than, I want to find God. Yes, God needs me as much as I need God. God is not the patriarch who stays home, doesn't move, and expects his children to come to him, apologize for their aberrant behaviour, beg for forgiveness, and promise to do better. To the contrary, he leaves the house, ignoring his. dignity by running toward them, pays no heed to apologies and promises of change, and brings them to the table richly prepared for them.

I am beginning now to see how radically the character of my spiritual journey will change when I no longer think of God as hiding out and making it as difficult as possible for me to find him, but, instead, as the one who is looking for me while I am doing the hiding. When I look through God's eyes at my lost self and discover God's joy at my coming home, then my life may become less anguished and more trusting.

Wouldn't it be good to increase God's joy by letting God find me and carry me home and celebrate my return with the angels? Wouldn't it be wonderful to make God smile by giving God the chance to find me and love me lavishly? Questions like these raise a real issue: that of my own self-concept. Can I accept that I am worth looking for? Do I believe that there is a real desire in God to simply be with me?

Here lies the core of my spiritual struggle: the struggle against self-rejection, self-contempt, and self-loathing. It is a very fierce battle because the world and its demons conspire to make me think about myself as worthless, useless, and negligible. Many consumerist economies stay afloat by manipulating the low self-esteem of their consumers and by creating spiritual expectations through material means. As long as I am kept "small," I can easily be seduced to buy things, meet people, or go places that promise a radical change in self-concept even though they are totally incapable of bringing this about. But every time I allow myself to be thus manipulated or seduced, I will have still more reasons for putting myself down and seeing myself as the unwanted child.

A First and Everlasting Love

For a very long time I considered low self-esteem to be some kind of virtue. I had been warned so often against pride and conceit that I came to consider it a good thing to deprecate myself But now I realize that the real sin is to deny God's first love for me, to ignore my original goodness. Because without claiming that first love and that original goodness for myself, I lose touch with my true self and embark on the destructive search among the wrong people and in the wrong places for what can only be found in the house of my Father.

I do not think I am alone in this struggle to claim God's first love and my original goodness. Beneath much human assertiveness, competitiveness, and rivalry; beneath much self-confidence and even arrogance, there is often a very insecure heart, much less sure of itself than outward behaviour would lead one to believe. I have often been shocked to discover that men and women with obvious talents and with many rewards for their accomplishments have so many doubts about their own goodness. Instead of experiencing their outward successes as a sign of their inner beauty, they live them as a cover-up for their sense of personal worthlessness. Not a few have said to me: "If people only knew what goes on in my innermost self, they would stop with their applause and praise."

I vividly remember talking with a young man loved and admired by everyone who knew him. He told me how a small critical remark from one of his friends had thrown him into an abyss of depression. As he spoke, tears streamed from his eyes and his body twisted in anguish. He felt that his friend had broken through his wall of defences and had seen him as he really was: an ugly hypocrite, a despicable man beneath his gleaming armour. As I heard his story, I realized what an unhappy life he had lived, even though the people around him had envied him for his gifts. For years he had walked around with the inner questions: "Does anyone really love me? Does anyone really care?" And every time he had climbed a little higher on the ladder of success, he had thought: "This is not who I really am; one day everything will come crashing down and then people will see that I am no good."

This encounter illustrates the way many people live their lives never fully sure that they are loved as they are. Many have horrendous stories that offer very plausible reasons for their low self-esteem: stories about parents who were not giving them what they needed, about teachers who mistreated them, about friends who betrayed them, and about a Church which left them out in the cold during a critical moment of their life.

The parable of the prodigal son is a story that speaks about a love that existed before any rejection was possible and that will still be there after all rejections have taken place. It is the first and everlasting love of a God who is Father as well as Mother. It is the fountain of all true human love, even the most limited. Jesus' whole life and preaching had only one aim: to reveal this inexhaustible, unlimited motherly and fatherly love of his God and to show the way to let that love guide every part of our daily lives. In his painting of the father, Rembrandt offers me a glimpse of that love. It is the love that always welcomes home and always wants to celebrate.

THE FATHER CALLS FOR A CELEBRATION

The father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the calf we have been fattening, and kill it; we will

celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." And they began to celebrate.

Giving the Very Best

It is clear to me that the younger son is not returning to a simple farm family. Luke describes the father as a very wealthy man with extensive property and many servants. To match this description Rembrandt clothes him and the two men who are watching him richly. The two women in the background lean against an arch that looks more like a part of a palace than of a farmhouse. The splendid garb of the father and the prosperous look of his surroundings stand in sharp contrast to the long suffering so visible in his near-blind eyes, his sorrowful face, and his stooped figure.

The same God who suffers because of his immense love for his children is the God who is rich in goodness and mercy and who desires to reveal to his children the richness of his glory. The father does not even give his son a chance to apologize. He pre-empts his son's begging by spontaneous forgiveness and puts aside his pleas as completely irrelevant in the light of the joy at his return. But there is more. Not only does the father forgive without asking questions and joyfully welcome his lost son home, but he cannot wait to give him new life, life in abundance. So strongly does God desire to give life to his returning son that he seems almost impatient. Nothing is good enough. The very best must be given to him. While the son is prepared to be treated as a hired servant, the father calls for the robe reserved for a distinguished guest; and, although the son no longer feels worthy to be called son, the father gives him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet to honour him as his beloved son and restore him as his heir.

I remember vividly the clothes I wore during the summer after my graduation from high school. My white trousers, broad belt, colourful shirt, and shining shoes all expressed how good I felt about myself My parents were very glad to buy these new clothes for me and showed great pride in their son. And I felt grateful to be their son. I especially recall how good it felt to wear new shoes. Since those days, I have travelled a lot and seen how people go through life barefoot. Now I understand even better the symbolic significance of new shoes. Bare feet indicate poverty and often slavery. Shoes are for the wealthy and the powerful. Shoes offer protection against snakes; they give safety and strength. They turn the hunted ones into hunters. For many poor people, getting shoes is a benchmark passage. An old Afro-American spiritual expresses this beautifully: "All of God's children got shoes. When I get to heaven I'm going to put on my shoes; I'm going to walk all over God's heaven."

The Father dresses his son with the signs of freedom, the freedom of the children of God. He does not want any of them to be hired servants or slaves. He wants them to wear the robe of honour, the ring of inheritance, and the footwear of prestige. It is like an investiture by which God's year of favour is inaugurated. The full meaning of this investiture and inauguration is spelled out in the fourth vision of the prophet Zechariah:

Yahweh showed me the high priest Joshua standing before the angel of Yahweh… Now Joshua was dressed in dirty clothes as he stood before the angel. The latter then spoke as follows to those who were standing before him. "Take off his dirty clothes and dress him in splendid robes and put a turban on his head." So they put a turban on his head and dressed him in dean clothes, while the angel of Yahweh stood by and said, "You see, I have taken your guilt away." The angel of Yahweh then made this declaration to Joshua: "Yahweh Sabaoth says this, 'If you walk in my ways and keep my ordinances, you shall govern my house, you shall watch over my courts, and I will give you free access among those in attendance here… So listen, High Priest Joshua… I shall remove this country's guilt in a single day. On that day... invite each other to come under your vine and your fig tree.' "

As I read the story of the prodigal son with this vision of Zechariah in mind, the word "Quick," with which the father exhorts his servants to bring his son the robe, ring, and sandals, expresses much more than a human impatience. It reveals the divine eagerness to inaugurate the new Kingdom that has been prepared from the beginning of time.

There is no doubt that the father wants a lavish feast. Killing the calf that had been fattened up for a special occasion shows how much the father wanted to pull out all the stops and offer his son a party such as had never been celebrated before. His exuberant joy is obvious. After having given his order to make everything ready, he exclaims: "We will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found," and immediately they begin to celebrate. There is an abundance of food, there is music and dance, and the happy party noises can be heard far beyond the house.

An invitation to Joy

I realize that I am not used to the image of God throwing a big party. It seems to contradict the solemnity and seriousness I have always attached to God. But when I think about the ways in which Jesus describes God's Kingdom, a joyful banquet is often at its center. Jesus says, "Many will come from east and west and sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob at the feast in the Kingdom of Heaven." And he compares the Kingdom of Heaven with a wedding feast offered by the king to his son. The king's servants go out to invite people with the words: "Look, my banquet is all prepared, my oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, everything is ready. Come to the wedding." But many were not interested. They were too busy with their own affairs.

Just as in the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus expresses here the great desire of his Father to offer his children a banquet and his eagerness to get it going even when those who are invited refuse to come. This invitation to a meal is an invitation to intimacy with God. This is especially dear at the Last Supper, shortly before Jesus' death. There he says to his disciples: "From now on, I tell you, I shall never again drink wine until the day I drink the new wine with you in the kingdom of my Father." And at the dose of the New Testament, God's ultimate victory is described as a splendid wedding feast: "The reign of the Lord our God Almighty has begun; let us be glad and joyful and give glory to God, because this is the time for the marriage of the Lamb… blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb…"

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. In all three of the parables which Jesus tells to explain why he eats with sinners, God rejoices and invites others to rejoice with him. "Rejoice with me," the shepherd says, "I have found my sheep that was lost." "Rejoice with me;" the woman says, "I have found the drachma I lost." "Rejoice with me," the father says, "this son of mine was lost and' is found."

All these voices are the voices of God. God does not want to keep his joy to himself He wants everyone to share in it. God's joy is the joy of his angels and his saints; it is the joy of all who belong to the Kingdom.

Rembrandt paints the moment of the return of the younger son. The elder son and the three other members of the father's household keep their distance. Will they understand the father's joy? Will they let the father embrace them? Will l? Will they be able to step out of their recriminations and share in the celebration? Will l?

I can see only one moment, and I am left guessing as to what will happen next. I repeat: Will they? Will l? I know the father wants all the people around him to admire the returning son's new clothes, to join him around the table, to eat and dance with him. This is not a private affair. This is something for all in the family to celebrate in gratitude. I repeat again: Will they? Will l? It is an important question because it touches -strange as it may sound - my resistance to living a joyful life.

God rejoices. Not because the problems of the world have been solved, not because all human pain and suffering have come to an end, nor because thousands of people have been converted and are now praising him for his goodness. No, God rejoices because one of his children who was lost has been found. What I am called to is to enter into that joy. It is God's joy, not the joy that the world offers. It is the joy that comes from seeing a child walk home amid all the

destruction, devastation, and anguish of the world. It is a hidden joy, as inconspicuous as the flute player that Rembrandt painted in the wall above the head of the seated observer.

I am not accustomed to rejoicing in things that are small, hidden, and scarcely noticed by the people around me. I am generally ready and prepared to receive bad news, to read about wars, violence, and crimes, and to witness conflict and disarray. I always expect my visitors to talk about their problems and pain, their setbacks and disappointments, their depressions and their anguish. Somehow I have become accustomed to living with sadness, and so have lost the eyes to see the joy and the ears to hear the gladness that belongs to God and which is to be found in the hidden corners of the world.

I have a friend who is so deeply connected with God that he can see joy where I expect only sadness. He travels much and meets countless people. When he returns home, I always expect him to tell me about the difficult economic situation of the countries he visited, about the great injustices he heard about, and the pain he has seen. But even though he is very aware of the great upheaval of the world, he seldom speaks of it. When he shares his experiences, he tells about the hidden joys he has discovered. He tells about a man, a woman, or a child who brought him hope and peace. He tells about little groups of people who are faithful to each other in the midst of all the turmoil. He tells about the small wonders of God. At times I realize that I am disappointed because I want to hear "newspaper news," exciting and exhilarating stories that can be talked about among friends. But he never responds to my need for sensationalism. He keeps saying: "I saw something very small and very beautiful, something that gave me much joy."

The father of the prodigal son gives himself totally to the joy that his returning son brings him. I have to learn from that. I have to learn to "steal" all the real joy there is to steal and lift it up for others to see. Yes, I know that not everybody has been converted yet, that there is not yet peace everywhere, that all pain has not yet been taken away, but still, I see people turning and returning home; I hear voices that pray; I notice moments of forgiveness, and I witness many signs of hope. I don't have to wait until all is well, but I can celebrate every little hint of the Kingdom that is at hand.

This is a real discipline. 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 with lies. I am tempted to be so impressed by the obvious sadness of the human condition that I no longer claim the joy manifesting itself in many small but very real ways. The reward of choosing joy is joy itself. Living among people with mental disabilities has convinced me of that. There is so much rejection, pain, and woundedness among us, but once you choose to claim the joy hidden in the midst of all suffering, life becomes celebration. Joy never denies the sadness, but transforms it to a fertile soil for more joy.

Surely I will be called naive, unrealistic, and sentimental, and I will be accused of ignoring the "real" problems, the structural evils that underlie much of human misery. But God rejoices when one repentant sinner returns. Statistically that is not very interesting. But for God, numbers never seem to matter. Who knows whether the world is kept from destruction because of one, two, or three people who have continued to pray when the rest of humanity has lost hope and dissipated itself?

From God's perspective, one bidden act of repentance, one little gesture of selfless love, one moment of true forgiveness is all that is needed to bring God from his throne to run to his returning son and to fill the heavens with sounds of divine joy.

Not Without Sorrow

If that is God's way, then I am challenged to let go of all the voices of doom and damnation that drag me into depression and allow the "small" joys to reveal the truth about the world I live in. When Jesus speaks about the world, he is very realistic. He speaks about wars and revolutions, earthquakes, plagues and famines, persecution and imprisonment, betrayal, hatred and assassinations. There is no suggestion at all that these signs of the world's darkness will ever be absent. But still, God's joy can be ours in the midst of it all. It is the joy of belonging to the

household of God whose love is stronger than death and who empowers us to be in the world while already belonging to the kingdom of joy.

This is the secret of the joy of the saints. From St. Anthony of the desert, to St. Francis of Assisi, to Frère Roger Schultz of Taizé, to Mother Teresa of Calcutta, joy has been the mark of the people of God. That joy can be seen on the faces of the many simple, poor, and often suffering people who live today among great economic and social upheaval, but who can already hear the music and the dance in the Father's house. I, myself, see this joy every day in the faces of the mentally handicapped people of my community. All these holy men and women, whether they lived long ago or belong to our own time, can recognize the many small returns that take place every day and rejoice with the Father. They have somehow pierced the meaning of true joy.

For me it is amazing to experience daily the radical difference between cynicism and joy. Cynics seek darkness wherever they go. They point always to approaching dangers, impure motives, and hidden schemes. They call trust naive, care romantic, and forgiveness sentimental. They sneer at enthusiasm, ridicule spiritual fervour. and despise charismatic behaviour. They consider themselves realists who see reality for what it truly is and who are not deceived by "escapist emotions." But in belittling God's joy, their darkness only calls forth more darkness.

People who have come to know the joy of God do not deny the darkness, but they choose not to live in it. They claim that the light that shines in the darkness can be trusted more than the darkness itself and that a little bit of light can dispel a lot of darkness. They point each other to flashes of light here and there, and remind each other that they reveal the hidden but real presence of God. They discover that there are people who heal each other' s wounds, forgive each other's offences, share their possessions, foster the spirit of community, celebrate the gifts they have received, and live in constant anticipation of the full manifestation of God's glory.

Every moment of each day I have the chance to choose between cynicism and joy. Every thought I have can be cynical or joyful. Every word I speak can be cynical or joyful. Every action can be cynical or joyful. Increasingly I am aware of all these possible choices, and increasingly I discover that every choice for joy in turn reveals more joy and offers more reason to make life a true celebration in the house of the Father.

Jesus lived this joy of the Father's house to the full. In him we can see his Father's joy o "Everything the Father has is mine," he says, including God's boundless joy. That divine joy does not obliterate the divine sorrow. In our world, joy and sorrow exclude each other. Here below, joy means the absence of sorrow and sorrow the absence of joy. But such distinctions do not exist in God. Jesus, the Son of God, is the man of sorrows, but also the man of complete joy. We catch a glimpse of this when we realize that in the midst of his greatest suffering Jesus is never separated from his Father. His union with God is never broken even when he "feels" abandoned by God. The joy of God belongs to his sonship, and this joy of Jesus and his Father is offered to me. Jesus wants me to have the same joy he enjoys: "I have loved you, just as my Father has loved me. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this, so that my own joy may be in you and your joy be complete."

As the returned child of God, living in the Father's house, God's joy is mine to claim. There is seldom a minute in my life that I am not tempted by sadness, melancholy, cynicism, dark moods, somber thoughts, morbid speculations, and waves of depression. And often I allow them to cover up the joy of my Father's house. But when I truly believe that I have already returned and that my Father has already dressed me with a cloak, ring, and sandals, I can remove the mask of the sadness from my heart and dispel the lie it tells about my true self and claim the truth with the inner freedom of the child of God.

But there is more. A child does not remain a child. A child becomes an adult. An adult becomes father and mother. When the prodigal son returns home, he returns not to remain a child, but to claim his sonship and become a father himself *As* the returned child of God who is invited to resume my place in my Father's home, the challenge now, yes the call, is to become the Father myself I am awed

by this call. For a long time I have lived with the insight that returning to my Father's home was the ultimate call. It has taken me much spiritual work to make the elder son as well as the younger son in me turn around and receive the welcoming love of the Father. The fact is that, on many levels, I am still returning. But the closer I come to home the clearer becomes the realization that there is a call beyond the call to return. It is the call to become the Father who welcomes home and calls for a celebration. Having reclaimed my sonship, I now have to claim fatherhood. When I first saw Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*, I could never have dreamt that becoming the repentant son was only a step on the way to becoming the welcoming father. I now see that the hands that forgive, console, heal, and offer a festive meal must become my own. Becoming the Father is, therefore, for me the surprising conclusion of these reflections on Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son.*

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