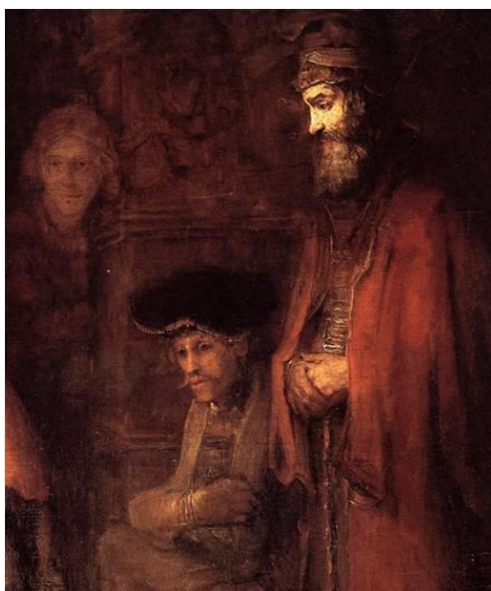


## THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON HENRI NOUWE

THE YOUNGER SON	THE ELDER SON	THE FATHER
Rembrandt and the Younger Son	Rembrandt and the Elder Son	Rembrandt and the Father
The Younger Son Leaves	The Elder Son Leaves	The Father Welcomes Home
The Younger Son's Return	The Elder Son's Return	The Father Calls for a Celebration
Conclusion: Becoming the Father		
Epilogue: Living the Painting		

### THE ELDER SON

*Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants he asked what it was all about. The servant told him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound." He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; but he retorted to his father, "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property - he and his loose women - you kill the calf we had been fattening." 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 ELDER SON

During my hours in the Hermitage, quietly looking at the *Prodigal Son*, I never for a moment questioned that the man standing at the right of the platform on which the father embraces his returned son was the elder son. The way he stands there looking at the great gesture of welcome leaves no room for doubt as to whom Rembrandt wanted to portray. I made many notes describing this stern-looking, distant observer and saw there everything Jesus tells us about the elder son.

Still, the parable makes it clear that the elder son is not yet home when the father embraces his lost son and shows him his mercy. To the contrary, the story shows that, when the elder son finally returns from his work, the welcome-home party for his brother is already in full swing.

I am surprised at how easily I missed the discrepancy between Rembrandt's painting and the parable, and simply took it for granted that Rembrandt wanted to paint both brothers in his portrayal of the prodigal son.

When I returned home and began to read all the historical studies of the painting, I quickly realized that many critics were much less sure than I as to the identity of the man standing at the right. Some described him as an old man, and some even questioned whether Rembrandt himself had painted him.

But then one day, more than a year after my visit to the Hermitage, a friend, Ivan Dyer, with whom I had often discussed my interest in the *Prodigal* painting, sent me a copy of Barbara Joan Haeger's "The Religious Significance of Rembrandt's Return of the Prodigal Son." This brilliant

study, which puts the painting into the context of the visual and iconographic tradition of Rembrandt's time, brought the elder son back into the picture.

Haeger shows that, in the biblical commentaries and paintings of Rembrandt's time, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector and the parable of the prodigal son were closely linked. Rembrandt follows that tradition. The seated man beating his breast and looking at the returning son is a steward representing the sinners and tax collectors, while the standing man looking at the father in a somewhat enigmatic way is the elder son, representing the Pharisees and scribes. By putting the elder son in the painting as the most prominent witness, however, Rembrandt goes not only beyond the literal text of the parable, but also beyond the painting tradition of his time. Thus Rembrandt holds on, as Haeger says, "not to the letter but to the spirit of the biblical text."

Barbara Haeger's findings are much more than a happy affirmation of my earliest intuition. They help me to see *The Return of the Prodigal Son* as a work that summarizes the great spiritual battle and the great choices this battle demands. By painting not only the younger son in the arms of his father, but also the elder son who can still choose for or against the love that is offered to him, Rembrandt presents me with the "inner drama of the soul" -his as well as my own. Just as the parable of the prodigal son encapsulates the core message of the Gospel and calls the listeners to make their own choices in face of it, so, too, does Rembrandt's painting sum up his own spiritual struggle and invite his viewers to make a personal decision about their lives.

Thus Rembrandt's bystanders make his painting a work that engages the viewer in a very personal way. In the fall of 1983, when I first saw the poster showing the central part of the painting, I immediately felt that I was personally called to something. Now that I am better acquainted with the whole painting and especially with the meaning of the prominent witness on the right, I am more than ever convinced of what an enormous spiritual challenge this painting represents.

Looking at the younger son and reflecting on Rembrandt's life, it became quite apparent to me that Rembrandt must have understood him in a personal way. When he painted *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, he had lived a life marked by great self-confidence, success, and fame, followed by many painful losses, disappointments, and failures. Through it all he had moved from the exterior light to the interior light, from the portrayal of external events to the portrayal of the inner meanings, from a life full of things and people to a life more marked by solitude and silence. With age, he grew more interior and still. It was a spiritual homecoming.

But the elder son is also part of Rembrandt's life experience, and many modern biographers are, in fact, critical of the romantic vision of his life. They stress that Rembrandt was much more subject to the demands of his sponsors and his need for money than is generally believed, that his subjects are often more the result of the prevailing fashions of his time than of his spiritual vision, and that his failures have as much to do with his self-righteous and obnoxious character as with the lack of appreciation on the part of his milieu.

Different new biographies see in Rembrandt more a selfish, calculating manipulator than a searcher for spiritual truth. They contend that many of his paintings, brilliant as they are, are much less spiritual than they seem. My initial reaction to these demythologizing studies of Rembrandt was one of shock. In particular, the biography by Gary Schwartz - which leaves little room for romanticizing Rembrandt - made me wonder if anything like a "conversion" had ever taken place. It is quite clear from the many recent studies of Rembrandt's relationships with his patrons, those who ordered and bought his work, as well as with family and friends, that he was a very difficult person to get along with. Schwartz describes him as a "bitter, revengeful person who used all permissible and impermissible weapons to attack those who came in his way."

Indeed, Rembrandt was known to act often selfishly, arrogantly, and even vengefully. This is most vividly shown in the way he treated Geertje Dirckx, with whom he had been living for six years. He used Geertje's brother, who had been given the power of attorney by Geertje herself, to "collect testimony from neighbours against her, so that she could be sent away to an insane

asylum.” The outcome was Geertje’s confinement in a mental institution. When the possibility later arose that she could be released, “Rembrandt hired an agent to collect evidence against her, to make certain that she stay locked up.”

During the year 1649, when these tragic events began to happen, Rembrandt was so consumed by them that he produced no work. At this point another Rembrandt emerges, a man lost in bitterness and desire for revenge, and capable of betrayal.

This Rembrandt is hard to face. It is not so difficult to sympathize with a lustful character who indulges in the hedonistic pleasures of the world, then repents, returns home, and becomes a very spiritual person. But appreciating a man with deep resentments, wasting much of his precious time in rather petty court cases and constantly alienating people by his arrogant behaviour, is much harder to do. Yet, to the best of my knowledge, that, too, was a part of his life, a part I cannot ignore.

Rembrandt is as much the elder son of the parable as he is the younger. When, during the last years of his life, he painted both sons in his *Return of the Prodigal Son*, he had lived a life in which neither the lostness of the younger son nor the lostness of the elder son was alien to him. Both needed healing and forgiveness. Both needed to come home. Both needed the embrace of a forgiving father. But from the story itself, as well as from Rembrandt’s painting, it is clear that the hardest conversion to go through is the conversion of the one who stayed home.

## THE ELDER SON LEAVES

*Now the elder son was out in the fields, and on his way back, as he drew near the house, he could hear music and dancing. Calling one of the servants, he asked what it was all about. The servant told him, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he has got him back safe and sound.” He was angry then and refused to go in, and his father came out and began to urge him to come in; but he retorted to his father, “All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property - he and his loose women - you kill the calf we had been fattening.*

### ***Standing with Clasped Hands***

During the hours I spent in the Hermitage looking at Rembrandt’s painting, I became increasingly fascinated by the figure of the elder son. I recall gazing at him for long periods and wondering what was going on in this man’s mind and heart. He is, without any doubt, the main observer of the younger son’s homecoming. At the time when I was familiar only with the detail of the painting in which the father embraces his returning son, it was rather easy to perceive it as inviting, moving, and reassuring. But when I saw the whole painting, I quickly realized the complexity of the reunion. The main observer, watching the father embracing his returning son, appears very withdrawn. He looks at the father, but not with joy. He does not reach out, nor does he smile or express welcome. He simply stands there at the side of the platform-apparently not eager to come higher up.

It is true that the “return” is the central event of the painting; however, it is not situated at the physical center of the canvas. It takes place at the left side of the painting, while the tall, stern elder son dominates the right side. There is a large open space separating the father and his elder son, a space that creates a tension asking for resolution.

With the elder son in the painting, it is no longer possible for me to sentimentalize the “return.” The main observer is keeping his distance, seemingly unwilling to participate in the father’s welcome. What is going on inside this man? What will he do? Will he come closer and embrace his brother as his father did, or will he walk away in anger and disgust?

Ever since my friend Bart remarked that I may be much more like the elder brother than the younger, I have observed this “man at the right” with more attentiveness and have seen many new and hard things. The way in which the elder son has been painted by Rembrandt shows him to be very much like his father. Both are bearded and wear large red cloaks over their shoulders. These

externals suggest that he and his father have much in common, and this commonality is underlined by the light on the elder son which connects his face in a very direct way with the luminous face of his father.

But what a painful difference between the two! The father bends over his returning son. The elder son stands stiffly erect, a posture accentuated by the long staff reaching from his hand to the floor. The father's mantle is wide and welcoming; the son's hangs flat over his body. The father's hands are spread out and touch the home-comer in a gesture of blessing; the son's are clasped together and held close to his chest. There is light on both faces, but the light from the father's face flows through his whole body-especially his hands-and engulfs the younger son in a great halo of luminous warmth; whereas the light on the face of the elder son is cold and constricted. His figure remains in the dark, and his clasped hands remain in the shadows.

The parable that Rembrandt painted might well be called "The Parable of the Lost Sons." Not only did the younger son, who left home to look for freedom and happiness in a distant country, get lost, but the one who stayed home also became a lost man. Exteriorly he did all the things a good son is supposed to do, but, interiorly, he wandered away from his father. He did his duty, worked hard every day, and fulfilled all his obligations but became increasingly unhappy and unfree.

### ***Lost in Resentment***

It is hard for me to concede that this bitter, resentful, angry man might be closer to me in a spiritual way than the lustful younger brother. Yet the more I think about the elder son, the more I recognize myself in him. As the eldest son in my own family, I know well what it feels like to have to be a model son.

I often wonder if it is not especially the elder sons who want to live up to the expectations of their parents and be considered obedient and dutiful. They often want to please. They often fear being a disappointment to their parents. But they often also experience, quite early in life, a certain envy toward their younger brothers and sisters, who seem to be less concerned about pleasing and much freer in "doing their own thing." For me, this was certainly the case. And all my life I have harboured a strange curiosity for the disobedient life that I myself didn't dare to live, but which I saw being lived by many around me. I did all the proper things, mostly complying with the agendas set by the many parental figures in my life-teachers, spiritual directors, bishops, and popes-but at the same time I often wondered why I didn't have the courage to "run away" as the younger son did.

It is strange to say this, but, deep in my heart, I have known the feeling of envy toward the wayward son. It is the emotion that arises when I see my friends having a good time doing all sorts of things that I condemn. I called their behaviour reprehensible or even immoral, but at the same time I often wondered why I didn't have the nerve to do some of it or all of it myself.

The obedient and dutiful life of which I am proud or for which I am praised feels, sometimes, like a burden that was laid on my shoulders and continues to oppress me, even when I have accepted it to such a degree that I cannot throw it off. I have no difficulty identifying with the elder son of the parable who complained: "All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends." In this complaint, obedience and duty have become a burden, and service has become slavery.

All of this became very real for me when a friend who had recently become a Christian criticized me for not being very prayerful. His criticism made me very angry. I said to myself, "How dare he teach me a lesson about prayer! For years he has lived a carefree and undisciplined life, while I since childhood have scrupulously lived the life of faith. Now he is converted and starts telling me how to behave!" This inner resentment reveals to me my own "lostness." I had stayed home and didn't wander off, but I had not yet lived a true life in my father's house. My anger and envy showed me my own bondage.

This is not something unique to me. There are many elder sons and elder daughters who are lost while still at home. And it is this lostness - characterized by judgment and condemnation, anger

and resentment, bitterness and jealousy - that is so pernicious and so damaging to the human heart. Often we think about lostness in terms of actions that are quite visible, even spectacular. The younger son sinned in a way we can easily identify. His lostness is quite obvious. He misused his money, his time, his friends, his own body. What he did was wrong; not only his family and friends knew it, but he himself as well. He rebelled against morality and allowed himself to be swept away by his own lust and greed. There is something very clear-cut about his misbehaviour. Then, having seen that all his wayward behaviour led to nothing but misery, the younger son came to his senses, turned around, and asked for forgiveness. We have here a classical human failure, with a straightforward resolution. Quite easy to understand and sympathize with.

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, likable, and a 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.

### ***Without Joy***

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 honour me, while they pay so much attention to those who take life so easily and so casually?"

It is in this spoken or unspoken complaint that I recognize the elder son in me. Often I catch myself complaining about little rejections, little impolitenesses, little negligences. Time and again I discover within me that murmuring, whining, grumbling, lamenting, and griping that go on and on even against my will. The more I dwell on the matters in question, the worse my state becomes. The more I analyze it, the more reason I see for complaint. And the more deeply I enter it, the more complicated it gets. There is an enormous, dark drawing power to this inner complaint. Condemnation of others and self-condemnation, self-righteousness and self-rejection keep reinforcing each other in an ever more vicious way. Every time I allow myself to be seduced by it, it spins me down in an endless spiral of self-rejection. As I let myself be drawn into the vast interior labyrinth of my complaints, I become more and more lost until, in the end, I feel myself to be the most misunderstood, rejected, neglected, and despised person in the world.

Of one thing I am sure. Complaining is self-perpetuating and counterproductive. Whenever I express my complaints in the hope of evoking pity and receiving the satisfaction I so much desire, the result is always the opposite of what I tried to get. A complainer is hard to live with, and very

few people know how to respond to the complaints made by a self-rejecting person. The tragedy is that, often, the complaint, once expressed, leads to that which is most feared: further rejection.

From this perspective, the elder son's inability to share in the joy of his father becomes quite understandable. When he came home from the fields, he heard music and dancing. He knew there was joy in the household. Immediately, he became suspicious. Once the self-rejecting complaint has formed in us, we lose our spontaneity to the extent that even joy can no longer evoke joy in us.

The story says: "Calling one of the servants, he asked what it was all about." There is the fear that I am excluded again, that someone didn't tell me what was going on, that I was kept out of things. The complaint resurges immediately: "Why was I not informed, what is this all about?" The unsuspecting servant, full of excitement and eager to share the good news, explains: "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the calf we had been fattening because he- has got him back safe and sound." But this shout of joy cannot be received. Instead of relief and gratitude, the servant's joy summons up the opposite: "He was angry then and refused to go in." Joy and resentment cannot coexist. The music and dancing, instead of inviting to joy, become a cause for even greater withdrawal.

I have very vivid memories of a similar situation. Once, when I felt quite lonely, I asked a friend to go out with me. Although he replied that he didn't have time, I found him just a little later at a mutual friend's house where a party was going on. Seeing me, he said, "Welcome, join us, good to see you." But my anger was so great at not being told about the party that I couldn't stay. All of my inner complaints about not being accepted, liked, and loved surged up in me, and I left the room, slamming the door behind me. I was completely incapacitated-unable to receive and participate in the joy that was there. In an instant, the joy in that room had become a source of resentment.

This experience of not being able to enter into joy is the experience of a resentful heart. The elder son couldn't enter into the house and share in his father's joy. His inner complaint paralyzed him and let the darkness engulf him.

Rembrandt sensed the deepest meaning of this when he painted the elder son at the side of the platform where the younger son is received in the father's joy. He didn't depict the celebration, with its musicians and dancers; they were merely the external signs of the father's joy. The only sign of a party is the relief of a seated flute player carved into the wall against which one of the women (the prodigal's mother?) leans. In place of the party, Rembrandt painted light, the radiant light that envelops both father and son. The joy that Rembrandt portrays is the still joy that belongs to God's house.

In the story one can imagine the elder son standing outside in the dark, not wanting to enter the lighted house filled with happy noises. But Rembrandt paints neither the house nor the fields. He portrays it all with darkness and light. The father's embrace, full of light, is God's house. All the music and dancing are there. The elder son stands outside the circle of this love, refusing to enter. The light on his face makes it clear that he, too, is called to the light, but he cannot be forced.

Sometimes, people wonder: Whatever happened to the elder son? Did he let himself be persuaded by his father? Did he finally enter into the house and participate in the celebration? Did he embrace his brother and welcome him home as his father had done? Did he sit down with the father and his brother at the same table and enjoy with them the festive meal?

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.

### ***An Open-ended Question***

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. This connection often makes me despair. At the very moment I want to speak or act out of my most generous self, I get caught in anger or resentment. And it seems that just as I want to be most selfless, I find myself obsessed about being loved. Just when I do my utmost to accomplish a task well, I find myself questioning why others do not give themselves as I do. Just when I think I am capable of overcoming my temptations, I feel envy toward those who gave in to theirs. It seems that wherever my virtuous self is, there also is the resentful complainer.

Here, I am faced with my own true poverty. I am totally unable to root out my resentments. They are so deeply anchored in the soil of my inner self that pulling them out seems like self-destruction. How to weed out these resentments without uprooting the virtues as well?

Can the elder son in me come home? Can I be found as the younger son was found? How can I return when I am lost in resentment, when I am caught in jealousy, when I am imprisoned in obedience and duty lived out as slavery? It is clear that alone, by myself, I cannot find myself. More daunting than healing myself as the younger son is healing myself as the elder son. Confronted here with the impossibility of self-redemption, I now understand Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "Do not be surprised when I say: 'You must be born from above.' "Indeed, something has to happen that I myself cannot cause to happen. I cannot be reborn from below; that is, with my own strength, with my own mind, with my own psychological insights. There is no doubt in my mind about this because I have tried so hard in the past to heal myself from my complaints and failed o . o and failed... and failed, until I came to the edge of complete emotional collapse and even physical exhaustion. I can only be healed from above, from where God reaches down. What is impossible for me is possible for God. "With God, everything is possible."

## THE ELDER SON'S RETURN

*The elder son... was angry then and refused to go in, and 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."*

### **A Possible Conversion**

The father wants not only his younger son back, but his elder son as well. The elder son, too, needs to be found and led back into the house of joy. Will he respond to his father's plea or remain stuck in his bitterness? Rembrandt, too, leaves the elder brother's final decision open to question. Barbara Joan Haeger writes: "Rembrandt does not reveal whether he sees the light. As he does not

clearly condemn the elder brother, Rembrandt holds out the hope that he too will perceive he is a sinner... the interpretation of the elder brother's reaction is left up to the viewer."

The open-endedness of the story itself and Rembrandt's depiction of it leave me with much spiritual work to do. As I look at the lighted face of the elder son, and then at his darkened hands, I sense not only his captivity, but also the possibility of liberation. This is not a story that separates the two brothers into the good and the evil one. The father only is good. He loves both sons. He runs out to meet both. He wants both to sit at his table and participate in his joy. The younger brother allows himself to be held in a forgiving embrace. The elder brother stands back, looks at the father's merciful gesture, and cannot yet step over his anger and let his father heal him as well.

The Father's love does not force itself on the beloved. Although he wants to heal us of all our inner darkness, we are still free to make our own choice to stay in the darkness or to step into the light of God's love. God is there. God's light is there. God's forgiveness is there. God's boundless love is there. What is so clear is that God is always there, always ready to give and forgive, absolutely independent of our response. God's love does not depend on our repentance or our inner or outer changes.

Whether I am the younger son or the elder son, God's only desire is to bring me home. Arthur Freeman writes:

*The father loves each son and gives each the freedom to be what he can, but he cannot give them freedom they will not take nor adequately understand. The father seems to realize, beyond the customs of his society, the need of his sons to be themselves. But he also knows their need for his love and a "home." How their stories will be completed is up to them. The fact that the parable is not completed makes it certain that the father's love is not dependent upon an appropriate completion of the story. The father's love is only dependent on himself and remains part of his character. As Shakespeare says in one of his sonnets: "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds."*

For me, personally, the possible conversion of the elder son is of crucial importance. There is much in me of that group of which Jesus is most critical: the Pharisees and the scribes. I have studied the books, learned about the laws, and often presented myself as an authority in religious matters. People have shown me a great deal of respect and even called me "reverend." I have been rewarded with compliments and praise, with money and prizes, and with much acclaim. I have been critical of many types of behaviour and often passed judgment on others.

So when Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son, I have to listen with the awareness that I am closest to those who elicited the story from him with the remark: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Is there any chance for me to return to the Father and feel welcome in his home? Or am I so ensnared in my own self-righteous complaints that I am doomed, against my own desire, to remain outside of the house, wallowing in my anger and resentment?

Jesus says: "How. blessed are you when you are poor... blessed are you who are hungry . . . blessed are you who are weeping..." but I am not poor, hungry, or weeping. Jesus prays: "I bless you Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things [of the kingdom] from the learned and the clever." It is to these, the learned and the clever, that I clearly belong. Jesus shows a distinct preference for those who are marginal in society-the poor, the sick, and the sinners-but I am certainly not marginal. The painful question that arises for me out of the Gospel is: "Have I already had my reward?" Jesus is very critical of those who "say their prayers standing up in their synagogues and at street corners for people to see them." Of them, he says: "In truth I tell you, they have had their reward." With all my writing and speaking about prayer and with all the publicity that I enjoy, I cannot help but wonder if these words are not meant for me.

Indeed they are. But the story of the elder son puts all of these agonizing questions in a new light, making it very plain that God does not love the younger son more than the elder. In the story the father goes out to the elder son just as he did to the younger, urges him to come in, and says, "My son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours."



These are the words I must pay attention to and allow to penetrate to the center of my self. God calls me “my son.” The Greek word for son that Luke uses here is *teknon*, “an affectionate form of address,” as Joseph A. Fitzmyer says. Literally translated, what the father says is “child.”

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 behaviour. 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.

### ***Letting Go of Rivalry***

The joy at the dramatic return of the younger son in no way means that the elder son was less loved, less appreciated, less favoured. The father does not compare the two sons. He loves them both with a complete love and expresses that love according to their individual journeys. He knows them both intimately. He understands their highly unique gifts and shortcomings. He sees with love the passion of his younger son, even when it is not regulated by obedience. With the same love, he sees the obedience of the elder son, even when it is not vitalized by passion. With the younger son there are no thoughts of better or worse, more or less, just as there are no measuring sticks with the elder son. The father responds to both according to their uniqueness. The return of the younger son makes him call for a joyful celebration. The return of the elder son makes him extend an invitation to full participation in that joy.

“In the house of my father there are many places to live,” Jesus says. Each child of God has there his or her unique place, all of them places of God. I have to let go of all comparison, all rivalry and competition, and surrender to the Father’s love. This requires a leap of faith because I have little experience of non-comparing love and do not know the healing power of such a love. As long as I 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 neighbour 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.

It is not surprising that, in his anger, the elder son complains to the father: “... you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends. But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property-he and his loose women you kill the calf we had been fattening.” These words reveal how deeply hurt this man must feel. His self-esteem is painfully wounded by his father’s joy, and his own anger prevents him from accepting this returning scoundrel as his brother. With the words “this son of yours” he distances himself from his brother as well as from his father.

He looks at the two of them as aliens who have lost all sense of reality and engage in a relationship that is completely inappropriate, considering the true facts of the prodigal’s life. The elder son no longer has a brother. Nor, any longer, a father. Both have become strangers to him. His brother, a sinner, he looks down on with disdain; his father, a slave owner, he looks up at with fear.

Here I see how lost the elder son is. He has become a foreigner in his own house. True communion is gone. Every relationship is pervaded by the darkness. To be afraid or to show

disdain, to suffer submission or to enforce control, to be an oppressor or to be a victim: these have become the choices for one outside of the light. Sins cannot be confessed, forgiveness cannot be received, the mutuality of love cannot exist. True communion has become impossible.

I know the pain of this predicament. In it, everything loses its spontaneity. Everything becomes suspect, self-conscious, calculated, and full of second-guessing. There is no longer any trust. Each little move calls for a countermove; each little remark begs for analysis; the smallest gesture has to be evaluated. This is the pathology of the darkness.

Is there a way out? I don't think there is—at least not on my side. It often seems that the more I try to disentangle myself from the darkness, the darker it becomes. I need light, but that light has to conquer my darkness, and that I cannot bring about myself I cannot forgive myself I cannot make myself feel loved. By myself I cannot leave the land of my anger. I cannot bring myself home nor can I create communion on my own. I can desire it, hope for it, wait for it, yes, pray for it. But my true freedom I cannot fabricate for myself. That must be given to me. I am lost. I must be found and brought home by the shepherd who goes out to me.

The story of the prodigal son is the story of a God who goes searching for me and who doesn't rest until he has found me. He urges and he pleads. He begs me to stop clinging to the powers of death and to let myself be embraced by arms that will carry me to the place where I will find the life I most desire.

Recently I lived, very concretely in my own flesh, the return of the elder son. While hitchhiking, I was hit by a car and soon found myself in a hospital dose to death. There I suddenly had the illuminating insight that I would not be free to die as long as I was still holding on to the complaint of not having been loved enough by the one whose son I am. I realized that I had not yet grown up completely. I felt strongly the call to lay to rest my adolescent complaints and to give up the lie that I am less loved than my younger brothers. It was frightening, but very liberating. When my dad, far advanced in years, flew over from Holland to visit me, I knew that this was the moment to claim my own God-given sonship. For the first time in my life, I told my father explicitly that I loved him and was grateful for his love for me. I said many things that I had never said before and was surprised at how long it had taken me to say them. My father was somewhat surprised and even puzzled by it all, but received my words with understanding and a smile. As I look back on this spiritual event, I see it as a true return, the return from a false dependence on a human father who cannot give me all I need to a true dependence on the divine Father who says: "You are with me always, and all I have is yours"; the return also from my complaining, comparing, resentful self to my true self that is free to give and receive love. And even though there have been, and undoubtedly will continue to be, many setbacks, it brought me to the beginning of the freedom to live my own life and die my own death. The return to the "Father from whom all fatherhood takes its name" allows me to let my dad be no less than the good, loving, but limited human being he is, and to let my heavenly Father be the God whose unlimited, unconditional love melts away all resentments and anger and makes me free to love beyond the need to please or find approval.

### ***Through Trust and Gratitude***

This personal experience of the return of the elder son in me may offer some hope to people caught in the resentment that is the bitter fruit of their need to please. I guess that all of us will someday have to deal with the elder son or the elder daughter in us. The question before us is simply: What can we do to make the return possible? Although God himself runs out to us to find us and bring us home, we must not only recognize that we are lost, but also be prepared to be found and brought home. How? Obviously not by just waiting and being passive. Although we are incapable of liberating ourselves from our frozen anger, we can allow ourselves to be found by God and healed by his love through the concrete and daily practice of trust and gratitude. Trust and gratitude are the disciplines for the conversion of the elder son. And I have come to know them through my own experience.

Without trust, I cannot let myself be found. Trust is that deep inner conviction that the Father wants me home. As long as I doubt that I am worth finding and put myself down as less loved than my younger brothers and sisters, I cannot be found. I have to keep saying to myself, “God is looking for you. He will go anywhere to find you. He loves you, he wants you home, he cannot rest unless he has you with him.”

There is a very strong, dark voice in me that says the opposite: “God isn’t really interested in me, he prefers the repentant sinner who comes home after his wild escapades. He doesn’t pay attention to me who has never left the house. He takes me for granted. I am not his favourite son. I don’t expect him to give me what I really want”.

At times this dark voice is so strong that I need enormous spiritual energy to trust that the Father wants me home as much as he does the younger son. It requires a real discipline to step over my chronic complaint and to think, speak, and act with the conviction that I am being sought and will be found. Without such discipline, I become prey to self-perpetuating hopelessness.

By telling myself that I am not important enough to be found, I amplify my self-complaint until I have become totally deaf to the voice calling for me. At some point, I must totally disown my self-rejecting voice and claim the truth that God does indeed want to embrace me as much as he does my wayward brothers and sisters. To prevail, this trust has to be even deeper than the sense of lostness. Jesus expresses its radicalness when he says: “Everything you ask and pray for, trust that you have it already, and it will be yours.” Living in this radical trust will open the way for God to realize my deepest desire.

Along with trust there must be gratitude-the opposite of resentment. Resentment and gratitude cannot coexist, since resentment blocks the perception and experience of life as a gift. My resentment tells me that I don’t receive what I deserve. It always manifests itself in envy.

Gratitude, however, goes beyond the “mine” and “thine” and claims the truth that all of life is a pure gift. In the past I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I realize that gratitude can also be lived as a discipline. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.

Gratitude as a discipline involves a conscious choice. I can choose to be grateful even when my emotions and feelings are still steeped in hurt and resentment. It is amazing how many occasions present themselves in which I can choose gratitude instead of a complaint. I can choose to be grateful when I am criticized, even when my heart still responds in bitterness. I can choose to speak about goodness and beauty, even when my inner eye still looks for someone to accuse or something to call ugly. I can choose to listen to the voices that forgive and to look at the faces that smile, even while I still hear words of revenge and see grimaces of hatred.

There is always the choice between resentment and gratitude because God has appeared in my darkness, urged me to come home, and declared in a voice filled with affection: “You are with me always, and all I have is yours.” Indeed, I can choose to dwell in the darkness in which I stand, point to those who are seemingly better off than I, lament about the many misfortunes that have plagued me in the past, and thereby wrap myself up in my resentment. But I don’t have to do this. There is the option to look into the eyes of the One who came out to search for me and see therein that all I am and all I have is pure gift calling for gratitude.

The choice for gratitude rarely comes without some real effort. But each time I make it, the next choice is a little easier, a little freer, a little less self-conscious. Because every gift I acknowledge reveals another and another until, finally, even the most normal, obvious, and seemingly mundane event or encounter proves to be filled with grace. There is an Estonian proverb that says: “Who does not thank for little will not thank for much.” Acts of gratitude make one grateful because, step by step, they reveal that all is grace.

Both trust and gratitude require the courage to take risks because distrust and resentment, in their need to keep their claim on me, keep warning me how dangerous it is to let go of my careful

calculations and guarded predictions. At many points I have to make a leap of faith to let trust and gratitude have a chance: to write a gentle letter to someone who will not forgive me, make a call to someone who has rejected me, speak: a word of healing to someone who cannot do the same.

The leap of faith always means loving without expecting to be loved in return, giving without wanting to receive, inviting without hoping to be invited, holding without asking to be held. And every time I make a little leap, I catch a glimpse of the One who runs out to me and invites me into his joy, the joy in which I can find not only myself, but also my brothers and sisters. Thus the disciplines of trust and gratitude reveal the God who searches for me, burning with desire to take away all my resentments and complaints and to let me sit at his side at the heavenly banquet.

### ***The True Elder Son***

The return of the elder son is becoming as important to me *as - if* not more important *than - the* return of the younger son. How will the elder son look when he is free from his complaints, free from his anger, resentments, and jealousies? Because the parable tells us nothing about the response of the elder son, we are left with the choice of listening to the Father or of remaining imprisoned in our self-rejection.

But even as I reflect on that choice and realize that the whole parable was told by Jesus and painted by Rembrandt for my conversion, it becomes clear to me that Jesus, who told the story, is himself not only the younger son, but the elder son as well. He has come to show the Father's love and to free me from the bondage of my resentments. All that Jesus says about himself reveals him as the Beloved Son, the one who lives in complete communion with the Father. There is no distance, fear, or suspicion between Jesus and the Father.

The words of the father in the parable: "My son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours" express the true relationship of God the Father with Jesus his Son. Jesus constantly affirms that all the glory that belongs to the Father belongs to the Son too. All the Father does, the Son does too. There is no separation between Father and Son: "The Father and I are one"; no division of work: "The Father loves the Son and has entrusted everything to him"; no competition: "I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father"; no envy: "The Son can do nothing by himself, he can do only what he sees the Father doing." There is perfect unity between Father and Son. This unity belongs at the center of Jesus' message: "You must believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me." To believe in Jesus means to believe that he is the one sent by the Father, the one in and through whom the fullness of the Father's love is revealed.

This is expressed dramatically by Jesus himself in the parable of the wicked tenants. The owner of the vineyard, after having sent in vain several stewards to collect his share of the harvest, decides to send "his beloved son." The tenants recognize that he is the heir and kill him to obtain the inheritance for themselves. This is the picture of the true son who obeys his father, not as a slave, but as the Beloved, and fulfils the will of the Father in full unity with him.

Thus Jesus is the elder Son of the Father. He is sent by the Father to reveal God's unremitting love for all his resentful children and to offer himself as the way home. Jesus is God's way of making the impossible possible-of allowing light to conquer darkness. Resentments and complaints, deep as they may seem, can vanish in the face of him in whom the full light of Sonship is visible. As I look again at Rembrandt's elder son, I realize that the cold light on his face can become deep and warm-transforming him totally-and make him who he truly is: "The Beloved Son on whom God's favour rests. "

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