

Lost and Found

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

The Reverend Amie Giguere

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Have you ever seen this painting? Its title is *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and was painted by artist Rembrandt Harmensoon van Rijn (known most commonly by just his first name, Rembrandt.) This painting is among this Dutch master's final works, likely completed within months of his death in 1669. The original painting was acquired by Catherine the Great in 1766 and is part of the collection in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

Catholic priest, theologian and influential spiritual writer Henri Nouwen, also a Dutchman himself, had a spiritual experience with this painting which unfolded over a few years. He first saw a poster of the painting which piqued his interest and later was able to spend multiple hours over the course of multiple days sitting in front of the original, which is a huge work in oil on canvas, eight feet high by six feet wide.

Nouwen was so captivated and inspired by the painting he wrote a whole book (published in 1992) with the same name as the painting. It contains his reflection on the connections between the painting and the parable in light of his own life journey.

The story is described in Luke 15 where Jesus told a parable to the Pharisees about a rich man and his two sons. While the title given to this parable, the painting and the book focuses our attention on the "prodigal" son who spent money freely and recklessly, there is also much to be learned from the other son, the one who stayed behind; as well as the father himself. In fact, I see three themes that describe precisely Jesus' meaning of the story he told to the Pharisees: the lost, the found and the joy.

The parable describes that the younger of two sons asked his father for his share of the inheritance and left. Jesus does not say why he left, but perhaps he wanted to enjoy his life instead of working hard in the family business. Whatever the reason, the son quickly runs out of money and becomes stuck in a faraway country when a severe famine takes place. To survive, he gets a job to feed the pigs and he is so hungry that he even wants to eat the food of the pigs. Then one day he realizes how foolish he has been and decides to return home to his father and beg him for forgiveness. That moment of return is what Rembrandt captures in this painting.

So, what do we see? If we look carefully, we can observe six people standing in front of an arched doorway. Rembrandt uses light to emphasize the important elements and people in the painting. On the left, situated in the light an old man, the father of the family, lovingly embracing a young man who bows his head in humility. This is his son, returned home after a long time. While the father is dressed in beautiful clothes, the son is not. He wears old clothes with holes and his sandals are worn and broken. If we look carefully, there is another detail that reminds us of his past. He still wears a dagger on his belt which he likely needed to defend himself in the outside world after he wasted all of his money.

On the right, also painted in the light is the older son. He is dressed in a red cloak and he has his hands folded while holding a cane. He looks at his younger brother with a mix of disapproval and envy.

It is not certain who the other three people in the painting are. The woman in the middle may be the mother or a sister. The seated man with the moustache may be an older servant. On the top left, barely visible is the silhouette of a female, perhaps a servant as well.

Rembrandt was not the first or the last artist to depict this story. However, the color contrasts are part of what makes this painting so dramatic and seems to highlight the human emotions of this work. Perhaps the most evident is the father's love in the embrace and the tenderness in the way he puts his hands on the son's back in the embrace. Looking at his face, we can identify multiple emotions at the same time. We see grief about his son having been lost to him, relief that his son has returned and a laugh of joy being able to embrace his son.

The aspect of this painting that gets most of the attention, though, are the hands of the father. If we look at them, we can notice that they are quite different from each other. The right hand has a lighter color than the left hand. The fingers on the right hand are longer and thinner than the ones on the left hand. The right hand is more traditionally feminine and the left hand is more traditionally masculine. The reasons for these differences have been debated quite a bit over the years, but most interpretations indicate that they represent both the hand of the father and the hand of the mother of the prodigal son. This is thought to be a symbolic reference to God having both masculine and feminine qualities which allows us to perhaps relate to God as both father and mother of us all.

Another really interesting element of the painting is that it combines two elements from the story: the meeting between the father and the younger son and the separate meeting between the father and the older son. According to Luke 15, the older brother is not present when the father is reunited with his younger son. But Rembrandt uses his artistic freedom and conveniently combines both scenes in this painting which allows us, in this one scene, to see Rembrandt's portrayal of all three themes which are present in Jesus' parable in Luke: the lost, the found and the joy.

I suspect this is why Henri Nouwen was so captivated and inspired by the painting. There is an intersection for him between the artwork of the painting and the art form of Jesus' storytelling. In the unfolding of Nouwen's story, he sees himself initially in the younger son, later in the older son, and finally in the father.

The shameful actions of the younger son toward his father include rejecting the value of family solidarity and demanding his inheritance before his father's death, which is a gross insult to the father. The inheritance would have been a portion of the family's land holdings. After the father presumably sells the land, the son left home and used up all the money from the sale with nothing to show for it.

The son was so stuck, so lost. Then Jesus uses a marvelous turn of a phrase. Wallowing among pigs, the prodigal "came to himself." He realized the profound discontinuity between who he has become and who he truly is. He doesn't have it figured out exactly, but he knows something is not the way it is supposed to be. It is then that he returns to his father.

As for the older son, he is not that happy. While his younger brother was wasting his money and displaying lack of morals and licentiousness, he has continued to work hard for his father's business and has never gotten a big party like the father will throw for the return of his younger son. The older son is consumed by jealousy and resentment. He does not have eyes to see what is right in front of him: that his father is always with him and that what belongs to his father also belongs to him. He is just as stuck or lost as his brother. However, he does not realize it because he has performed all the duties expected of him, he checks all of the boxes of what he "should" do to be a devoted son, but there is no joy in it. What is revealed is a spiritual and emotional distance instead of a physical one. This son, however, does not "come to himself" and therefore remains lost.

Perhaps we ourselves might notice some resonance in that sense of being stuck or being lost or having a sense that something is not the way it is supposed to be or having discontinuity between our actions and our deep sense of our God-given self. Losing our way isn't always as dramatic as the story of the prodigal son and his brother. Perhaps we've lost the spark of life. Maybe we're dulled by our routines, or we're wrapped in our cocoon of comfort. It could be that we've surrendered to our excuses, are consumed with the past, we're burned out or have simply begun to take life and what we have for granted.

The parable does not tell us if the older son came to accept his father's response to his younger brother's return, and neither does Rembrandt in his painting. It is left as an open question. However, the parable does tell us that there was joy! The father tells his older son, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and now has been found."

Let's remember that Jesus is telling this parable to the Pharisees and Scribes who were grumbling and saying, "This fellow (Jesus) welcomes sinners and eats with them." It is as if Jesus is asking them if they are going to join him in reaching out to their wayward brothers and sisters. Perhaps he is asking them if they are going to rejoice with him over God's most gracious mercy, or if they, like the elder brother, will refuse to enter the banquet room, preferring to be on the outside, thinking of nothing but their resentment over the reconciliation between God and those who seek it.

Ultimately, this story is not really about the two brothers. It is really about the father who welcomes his erring younger son and pleads with the elder son to join the banquet. By humbling himself, he makes possible the reconciliation with the younger son and leaves the door open for the same with the elder brother as well.

Rembrandt, faithful to the parable, intended that our primary attention go to the father before anyone else. Although not in the physical center of the painting, the father is the center of the event the painting portrays and from him comes all the light.

In the conclusion of his book, Nouwen asks these questions: Why talk so much about being like the sons when the real question is: Are you interested in being like the father? Do I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home, but also the one who welcomes; not just the one who receives compassion but the one who offers it as well? (Nouwen 1992, 122)

Becoming like God is not just one important aspect of Jesus' teaching, it is at the very heart of his message.

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First Church West Hartford
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

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