

“Loving the Eternal Embrace”

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A Communion Reflection on

Rembrandt's painting The Return of the Prodigal

Luke 15.11-24

October 4, 2020

For the rest of our time today, we're going to hear Scripture, I'll offer some thoughts, we'll listen to music and pray, and then celebrate Jesus our Lord's Supper.

In the Bible reading, folks are accusing Jesus of gathering to himself the wrong sorts of people: screw-ups, sell-outs, and low-lives. But Jesus loves them and loves being with them. When he is confronted with this, he tells stories like this one. It's from Luke's Gospel of Jesus, chapter 15.

A certain man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, *'Father, give me my share of the inheritance.'* Then the father divided his estate between them. Soon afterward, the younger son gathered everything together and took a trip to a land far away. There, he wasted his wealth through extravagant living.

When he had used up his resources, a severe food shortage arose in that country and he began to be in need. He hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He longed to eat his fill from what the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, *'How many of my father's hired hands have more than enough food, but I'm starving to death! I will get up and go to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Take me on as one of your hired hands."'* So he got up and went to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. His father ran to him, hugged him, and kissed him. Then his son said, *'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son.'* But the father said to his servants, *'Quickly, bring out the best robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet! Fetch the fattened calf and slaughter it. We must celebrate with feasting because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life! He was lost and is found!'* And they began to celebrate.

Luke 15.11-24

Common English Bible

Jesus' story continues on from there, because there's still the older son, and he's missing from the party. He's been lost from his dad in a different way, and that needs tending too.

For today, though, I stopped part-way, so we can focus on one scene. It's when the younger son returns, and *is returned* by his dad. I say his dad returns him, because while the son can physically come back to the farm, only his dad can return him home.

The Dutch artist Rembrandt imagined and painted this moment. I want to use his painting to help us imagine our own "*being returned home*" by Jesus.¹

I'm also drawing on reflections by Henri Nouwen.² He himself was Dutch, then Canadian, a Catholic priest, professor, chaplain, and spiritual companion for many.

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The younger had taken what he could, run off, lived it up big, but ended up alone, starving, to where he was even feeling envious of pigs.

Who Are You Here?

Now you've come back, with nothing. Your clothes are rags, torn and filthy.

What's been ripping you up? Soiling you? Left you uncovered?

Your head is shaved. (Nothing wrong with that, I'll quickly add.) But in Rembrandt's day, that was the mark of a convict. Your identity, your individuality is shorn away. You're a nobody, a number, an absolute outsider.

What's been shorn from you? What about you has been taken away? How are you invisible? Forgotten? Shut out?

Your shoes. One has fallen off entirely, and the other is close. Broken, worn down by a hard journey.

What hard journey are you on? What are your blisters?

Who are you here?

Let's listen and reflect with *The Wanderer*, sung by Johnny Cash and written by U2.³

[You can listen to it here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPhc996LDg0]

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Return_of_the_Prodigoal_Son_\(Rembrandt\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Return_of_the_Prodigoal_Son_(Rembrandt))

² Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Doubleday, 1992). Citations are from this book, unless otherwise indicated.

³ U2 with Johnny Cash. "The Wanderer." from the album *Zooropa*, 1993.

*I went out walking
Through streets paved with gold
Lifted some stones
Saw the skin and bones
Of a city without a soul
I went out walking
Under an atomic sky
Where the ground won't turn
And the rain it burns
Like the tears when I said goodbye*

*Yeah I went with nothing
Nothing but the thought of you
I went wandering*

*I went drifting
Through the capitals of tin
Where men can't walk
Or freely talk
And sons turn their fathers in
I stopped outside a church house
Where the citizens like to sit
They say they want the kingdom
But they don't want God in it*

*I went out riding
Down that old eight lane
I passed by a thousand signs
Looking for my own name*

*I went with nothing
But the thought you'd be there too
Looking for you*

*I went out there
In search of experience
To taste and to touch
And to feel as much
As a man can
Before he repents*

*I went out searching
Looking for one good man
A spirit who would not bend or break
Who would sit at his father's right hand
I went out walking
With a bible and a gun
The word of God lay heavy on my heart
I was sure I was the one
Now Jesus, don't you wait up
Jesus, I'll be home soon
Yeah I went out for the papers
Told her I'd be back by noon*

*Yeah I left with nothing
But the thought you'd be there too
Looking for you*

*Yeah I left with nothing
Nothing but the thought of you
I went wandering.*

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He'd come to his senses and headed home. No way he'd be welcomed back, not after all he'd done, especially to Dad. Still, he figured he could beg for a job working on the farm. At least he'd have square meals and a place to sleep. He wasn't sure he wanted more anyway. Things hadn't been so good before. What was there for him?

What's here for you?

Notice in the painting, he's got a sword. Not much of one but, still, it's something. A sign that his former nobility has not been all forgotten.

Your nobility.

You! Made in the image of God. You! Crafted with the delight of your Creator. You! Bright with Eden's dawn light.⁴ You belong to God, not as a possession, but a child, an heir. Even, Jesus says, a friend!

So God's robe of nobility, God's ring of authority, God's feast of celebrate . . . all are given to you. Because you've been brought home. Given freely, before you can even get all of your "I'm sorry" out. God is just so happy that you are here.

Now let's pray with this song, *Prodigal*, by The Michael Gungor Band.⁵

[You can hear it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4D66YvHe3qI>]

*I've tasted Your glory
and I left it there.
You poured out Your Spirit
and I didn't care.
Still you loved me*

*I've lived for myself
with nobody to blame.
I took what You gave me
and squandered Your grace.
Still You loved me.*

*Nothing compares to what
You've done for me
Nothing compares to what
You've done for me.*

*I could live for the broken
and share in their pain.
I could die like a martyr
or live like a saint
just to love You.*

*I could sing like the angels
and gather Your praise:
Be blessed beyond measure
and give it away
just to love You.*

*Still nothing compares
to what You've done for me.
Nothing compares
to what You've done for me.*

*My heart has been broken;
I've laid out my shame.
Because of Your mercy,
All I can say is
I love You.*

*So I'll tell of Your story
I'll carry Your name
I'll live for Your glory Lord,
I'll share in Your pain
just to love You.*

*Nothing compares to what
You've done for me.
Nothing compares to what
You've done for me.*

*Nothing can separate us
Nothing can separate us
Not death or life
Or depth or height
Or unseen power
Now or ever!*

⁴ From *The Message* translation of Psalm 8:5.

⁵ Michael Gungor and Michael Rossback, "Prodigal" from the album *Ancient Skies*, 2006.

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Who Holds You Here?

Those hands Rembrandt painted, they look different. The left hand (on our right) is strong, muscular. A dad's hand? The right hand (our left) is more delicate, soft. A mother's?

The red cloak spreads wide, expansive, like a tent for this worn-out child. Or maybe a bird's wings. Jesus, as he wept over his city: "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem. . . . How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.*"⁶

You. Your head gently lifted and rested by his breathing belly . . . held against the texture of his woolen cloak . . . under her wings, pulled in against her womb. Hands holding you.

You. A bird finally stopping your long-wearied flight, and alighted on the one branch you feared you'd never find.

You belong here.

You can stop worrying about yourself here.

You are anxious, worried about what others are thinking, not sure what to think yourself. But all that washes from you, a liquid weight draining from your veins and bones, your memories and your lay-awake-at-night thoughts, seeping away, leaving you light.

Who are you here? Don't worry about that.

What's for you here? That either.

You are here, held. That is all.

God holds you. It is enough. Forever. And even now.

Spiegel im Spiegel by Arvo Pärt.⁷

Listen to it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJ6Mzvh3XCc>

⁶ Matthew 23:37.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiegel_im_Spiegel