

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

April 3, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Prodigal Son

For the month of April, I would like to reflect with you on one of the greatest stories in the Bible which also happens to be one of the greatest religious paintings of all times, and happens to be the title of one of the great spiritual books of one of my favorite spiritual writers Henri Nouwen: the story of the Prodigal Son.

The Prodigal Son is of course the story from Luke's Gospel (15:11-32). This parable inspired the Dutch painter Rembrandt to paint a beautiful masterpiece in 1669. One art historian describes the painting as follows: **In the painting, the son has returned home in a wretched state from travels in which he has wasted his inheritance and fallen into poverty and despair. He kneels before his father in repentance, wishing for forgiveness and a renewed place in the family, having realized that even his father's servants had a better station in life than he. His father receives him with a tender gesture. His hands seem to suggest mothering and fathering at once; the left appears larger and more masculine, set on the son's shoulder, while the right is softer and more receptive in gesture. Standing at the right is the prodigal son's older brother, who crosses his hands in judgment; in the parable he objects to the father's compassion for the sinful son.**



Fr. Henri Nouwen spent many days reflecting on the story of the Prodigal Son while staring at the painting. He then went forth and wrote a great book that many consider to be one of the best spiritual books written. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my commentary will be in regular font.

Henri Nouwen begins his reflection on the painting by reflecting on the role of men in the back ground that you can barely make out. He refers to them as the observers for all they seem to do is sit back and witness everything that is going on.

As I reflect on my own journey, I become more and more aware of how long I have played the role of observer. For years I had instructed students on the different aspects of the spiritual life, trying to help them see the importance of living it. But had I, myself, really ever dared to step into the center, kneel down, and let myself be held by a forgiving God?

Many of us want a deep relationship with God but are we willing to take the steps necessary to develop that relationship. It is easier to sit on the sidelines and Monday morning quarterback than take the chance and get on the field to play.

But giving up the somewhat safe position of the critical observer seemed like a great leap into totally unknown territory. I so much wanted to keep some control over my spiritual journey, to remain able to predict at least part of the outcome that relinquishing the security of the observer for the vulnerability of the returning son seemed close to impossible.

The prodigal son had no idea how the Father was going to respond when he went back to Him. Are we willing to give up control over our spiritual journey in order to return to the father? One way to do this is to get rid of the idea of a just world theory or karma. Bad things do happen to good people and this is important to admit because we cannot practice our faith just in the hopes that bad things will not happen to us. We practice our faith because we hope and pray that God will bring good out of the evil or bad that happens to us.

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

April 10, 2015

Spiritual Ponderings

Prodigal Son

For the month of April as we transition from Lent into Easter, I would like to reflect with you on the insights of the parable of the Prodigal Son as shared with us through Fr. Nouwen's Book: *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* and Rembrandt's painting *The Prodigal Son*. Quotes from Nouwen's book will be in bold and my commentary will be in regular font.



Kenneth Bailey, in his penetrating explanation of Luke's story, shows that the son's manner of leaving is tantamount to wishing the father dead. The son's "leaving" is, therefore, a much more offensive act than it seems at first reading. It is a heartless rejection of the home in which the son was born and nurtured and a break with the most precious tradition carefully upheld by the larger community of which he was a part.

The younger son basically tells his father to "drop dead." He no longer wants any sort of relationship with him. He has chosen pleasure and adventure over his family. I can barely imagine how crushing this must have been to the Father. I do this all the time when I sin. I reject all that God has given me and tell God I wish he as dead because I rather have momentary pleasure than everlasting life.

When Luke writes, "and left for a distant country," he indicates much more than the desire of a young man to see the world. He speaks about a drastic cutting loose from the way of living, thinking, and acting that has been handed down to him from generation to generation as a sacred legacy. More than disrespect, it is a betrayal of the treasured values of family and community. The "distant country" is the world in which everything considered holy at home is disregarded.

Once again Luke is driving home the fact that the younger son has sinned against his father not in some small way but in the ultimate way possible.

More than any other story in the Gospel, the parable of the prodigal son expresses the boundlessness of God's compassionate love.

Meister Eckhart, a medieval theologian once said, "In order to get at God in his greatest, we must get at ourselves at our worse." In other words the more realize just how bad our sins are and that God still loves us the more we see the greatness of God.

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

When I know that I am loved by God then I follow his commandments with greater ease. When I doubt God's love for me following God's commandments becomes much more difficult.

One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness. There is something in us humans that keep us clinging to our sins and prevents us from letting God erase our past and offer us a completely new beginning. Sometimes it even seems as though I want to prove to God that my darkness is too great to overcome. While God wants to restore me to the full dignity of sonship, I keep insisting that I will settle for being a hire servant. At Baptism God adopted us and made us His sons and daughters. He desires to not be an absentee father. He really wants to spend eternity with each of us around His dinner table.

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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. Exterioerly 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 because increasingly unhappy and unfree.

Sin entices us with pleasure but ultimately robs us of our freedom and happiness. Sin is like a drug it takes more and more of the same substance to reach the same level as the first high. We begin to devote all of our resources to getting that feeling. In the story of the older son he has an addiction to hate and unforgiveness. He is so caught up in these feelings that he cannot see how much the Father loves him.

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 resentful, proud, unkind, selfish person, one that had remained deeply hidden, even though it had been growing stronger and more powerful over the years.

There is a part of us who desires the idea of karma (just world theory) to be true. We feel cheated when bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people because karma gives us an idea that we can at least control our destinies a little bit. Instead we must trust God will bring good out of an evil or difficulties we face.

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 is countless subtle and not-so-subtle ways, forming a bedrock of human resentment. It is the complaint that cries out: “I tried so hard, worked so long, did so much, and still I have not received what others get so easily. Why do people not thank me, not invite me, not play with me, not honor me, while they pay so much attention to those who take life so easily and so casually?” The elder son is so caught up in being a victim that He misses the loving way in which his Father responds to him. How often do we miss God's loving responses because we think God should do things are way?

This is not a story that separates the two brothers into 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.

We can all get better at not judging one another.

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



Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

April 24, 2015

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When she visited me in my "hermitage" and spoke with me about the Prodigal Son, she said, "Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father."

While we might find comfort in identifying ourselves with the oldest son or the youngest son, we are all called and challenged to be the loving Father. This is what Catholics mean when we talk about the Universal call to holiness. We are all called to love like God loves.



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's son arrival, he left the party, went out to him, and pleaded with him to join them.

From time to time it is important for us to check in with ourselves to make sure that we are not neglecting anyone important in our life because of the noise someone else is making. Even when we are right are we willing to leave the celebration to comfort those who are angry with us?

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 whom, doesn't move, and expects his children to come to him, apologize for their aberrant behavior, 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.

Yes God desires you, wants you, chooses you—and all of you.

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 welcomes his lost son home, but he cannot wait to give him the new life, life in abundance. So strongly does God desire to give life to his rupturing 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 honor him as his beloved son and restore him as his heir. -

Let God love you. Remember you got into trouble the first time because you ran away from God.

But God rejoices when one repentant sinner returns. Statistically that is not very interesting. But for God, numbers never seem to matter.

God does not love us because it makes sense. He loves us because He loves us. He doesn't care if the press is watching or if he will look like a fool. He loves us.

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 naïve, care romantic, and forgiveness sentimental. They sneer at enthusiasm, ridicule spiritual fervor, and despise charismatic behavior. They consider themselves realist who see reality for what it truly is and who are not deceived by "escapist emotions." But in belittling God's joy, their darkness calls forth more darkness.

People who have come to know the joy of God do not deny 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 here are people who heal each other's wounds, forgive each other's offenses, 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.

