

## The Fourth Sunday of Lent March 6, 2016

Dutch theologian, scripture scholar and prolific author Henri Nouwen first encountered Rembrandt's "The Return of the Prodigal Son" on a poster on the door of an office at the L'Arche community, a community for the disabled located in Canada and France. That encounter prompted Fr. Nouwen to go to the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, in order to see the original.

There, he received permission from the curators of the museum to be alone with the painting. Fr. Nouwen spent hours in prayerful contemplation, the result of which became his wonderful book *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Doubleday, New York: 1992).

Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son would have had a profound effect on His Jewish audience, because throughout their long and checkered history, the people of Israel knew very well the experience of leaving and coming home to God.

From the time they were called to follow Moses into the desert and then onward to the land promised them by God, there was always a strong sense of homecoming urging them on.

When they sinned and turned their backs on their Creator and Redeemer, God never gave up. Time and time again, God's mercy brought them home to healing and forgiveness. As we heard in today's first reading from Joshua, God's mercy was celebrated each year on the feast of Passover.

In that special celebration, they remembered the story of their beginnings and praised the God who never ceased calling them home.

This truth is reflected all throughout Sacred Scripture and especially in the readings chosen for Lent. During this season of fasting, prayer, penance and special attentiveness to the poor, we are shown mercy as we remember the extent of God's love revealed to us in Jesus.

St. Paul tells us in our second reading that through Christ, we and all the world are reconciled to God. All has been made right; all has been made new.

And more than that, those who are blessed with such a gift are then charged by God with the ministry of reconciliation.

Lent is indeed the season for making things right with family, friends and everyone in our lives.

Now back to the parable of the prodigal son, we might sense an invitation to find ourselves in the text. With whom do we identify at this particular time in our lives?

Are we the wayward son, whose dreams of a good, happy and wealthy life evaporated in a pigsty in a foreign land? Look at the picture. Now returned home in shame and sorrow, he is disheveled, kneeling before his father. He knows he has dishonored his father and himself.

He knows he does not deserve it, but he relies on the goodness of his father and surrenders himself to his love and mercy.

Or perhaps we see ourselves in the faithful but resentful elder son? His anger makes him bitter; he refuses to rejoice or share in the celebration. Why? Because he doesn't understand his father's love.

Or do any of us see ourselves in the father? Any parent can sympathize with this generous man whose child's actions hurt him beyond what we may imagine.

Because you see, by demanding his inheritance early, his son was saying essentially, that as far as he was concerned, his father was dead. We can sympathize with the father — but can we be as welcoming and forgiving? This is the challenge put before each of us today and every day.

The father in the Gospel story shows us the true face of God, who grieved over his son's loss and yearns for his return and reunion.

But the scribes and Pharisees could not see the true face of God in their own lives and in their dealings with others. They projected their preference, like the older son did, for judgment and retribution on God, and tried to force that on a struggling people.

We also can find ourselves prone to judge and dismiss those who are in trouble.

Whether other people have problems because of their own choices, or because of conditions beyond their control, our all-too-frequent response is to pass judgment and condemn them.

Jesus addressed this parable to the scribes and Pharisees — but also to each one of us here today.

We are all sinners. We are all in need of God's loving kindness, God's ever-available mercy. Like the father in this parable, the God of love and mercy is always waiting for our return.

Sr. Sue Mosteller, a companion and fellow community member of Fr. Nouwen's at the Daybreak L'Arche Community in Richmond Hill, Ontario, once told him, "Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father." And so are we all.