

A Dreamer's Portrait of God

From the Lenten sermon series: The Dream

Text: Luke 15:20

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I love books and I have many books. One of them is a book by Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Catholic contemplative writer. Henri Nouwen has written many books, but this book is special. It is entitled *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. It's beautifully bound and it has reproductions of Rembrandt's painting of the return of the Prodigal. And the picture returns throughout the course of the book as Nouwen writes about the wonder of the love of God that embraces this son, and speaks also about the elder brother who stands on the sidelines. It is a beautiful book. The portrait struck Nouwen back in the early 80's. He purchased a poster reproduction of it, put it wherever he was living at the time, and then had opportunity to go to Leningrad to the Hermitage Museum, where he saw the original. The picture is one of an old father, nearly blind, with his hands on the son as he kneels, and Nouwen contemplated that picture for over four hours on two different occasions; he sat before that picture and just absorbed it. It became for him a portrait of God as it was a rendering of the portrait of God that Jesus painted in words in the Gospel lesson of the morning.

As Nouwen contemplated this picture, he noticed that the left hand was masculine and it was firm on the shoulder of the son, but the right hand was obviously not a match. It was a more feminine hand, and Nouwen contemplated what Rembrandt was expressing near the end of his life after he himself had suffered such deep loss of his wife and of children and of dear friends. The aged Rembrandt painting an aged father receiving a child, one hand obviously masculine, the other as though it would caress, a feminine hand. I suppose that Rembrandt was familiar with that word from Isaiah, where Judah says God has forsaken us; God has forgotten us, and the Lord responds, "I have not forsaken you. I have not forgotten you. Could a mother forget a child at her breast? Could a mother lack compassion for the child of her womb? But even if these should forget, I will never forget you. I have engraved you in the palm of my hands. Like as a mother comforteth, as a father pities his children ..." I suppose all of those images were in Rembrandt's mind as he painted this magnificent portrait of the father receiving the son to his home. And I suspect that all of that imagery was also in the mind of Jesus.

We noted last week that he came to his hometown and declared his dream, and the contours of that dream he took from the Prophet Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, the release of the captives, to bring healing, to cause the lame to walk and the blind to see and the deaf to hear, to proclaim the year of God's favor." This was the declaration of the dream of Jesus.

Where do dreams come from? What is it that settles in on one, that takes possession of one, that causes one's whole life to be shaped, and energizes and empowers one's life to live out that vision? A transforming moment? Certainly in Jesus' case, the deep mining of that tradition of Israel that had shaped him. Some encounter perhaps, some human encounter that made it all come together for him. A Rosa Parks climbs on a bus and sits where she is not supposed to sit because she is a black woman. And they tell her to move and suddenly she says, "No." Because suddenly in a moment, her own human dignity takes possession of her and she resists that code that was written in concrete. Martin Luther King picks up the story and stands eventually before the Lincoln Memorial and sings, "I have a dream." What was it that triggered a Gandhi to become the leader of passive resistance that had such earthshaking effect? What was it that caused a Nelson Mandela to be willing to endure years and years of incarceration for what he believed to be right and true? What was it that enabled Jesus to live out so faithfully that vision he had of who God was and what God was calling him to be? He was a dreamer, and it's dangerous to dream. Because it's so possible that the dream will fail, or that we'll be rejected. Remember the story in Genesis of Joseph - he was a dreamer. And he came one day approaching his brothers with supplies, and they said, "Here comes the dreamer." It's so easy to write off the one whose life is consumed by a vision. They make us nervous, I suppose. It's unsettling. The dream is too bold, too daring. If it demands change and transformation, dreamers die.

Jesus was a dreamer. And his whole life was the living out of a dream, and he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He certainly claimed the authorization of God. He must have been totally convinced that his vision of God was rooted in reality and in truth. It was a vision of God, a portrait of God that ran contrary to the accepted wisdom of the time. He ran into conflict because he lived out his vision of God full of mercy and compassion, a God who would not exclude, but include, a God who caused him to sit at table with anyone, a God who would break through all of those dividers between people that we call alienation, that would make some people inside and some people outside. There were so many people outside in Jesus' day. He saw them all. They were like sheep without a shepherd, harassed, and Jesus was moved with compassion for them because he must have been convinced that there was compassion in the heart of God for these people because they didn't really have a chance. They were ruled out from the beginning. People wear down after a while, if they get continually reflected back to them that they don't amount to anything, they are ritually impure, they are in a class that is not acceptable, finally people just wear down.

The worst thing in the world we can do to people is to reflect to them that they don't count, that they have no value, that they belong on the outside. Finally, one begins to imbibe that in the very marrow of one's bones and one begins to take for granted that that is what one is - just one no-account. And Jesus broke through all of that and he had relationship with all kinds of people, he sat at table with and he invited them to his table and he scandalized those who were responsible for keeping society orderly. That's the setting of the story he told. I didn't read the first three verses of Luke 15, but you'll find there that it was the religious leadership of his day that was grumbling because he communicated with tax collectors and sinners. Now, sinners – they weren't bad people. That was a class of people, people that were simply outclassed. And they grumbled and they said, "Look, he sits at table with people like this!" And so, he told his story. It had three parts - about a lost sheep, and a lost coin, and about two lost sons.

We call it the parable of the prodigal son, but even in that we misname it and we resist what is really there. It is not the parable of the prodigal son. Neither is it the parable of the elder son, although there is a prodigal son and an elder son, two brothers, but it's not about the boys. It's about God. It is about the father. This is a story about God. This is Jesus' understanding of God. This is the dreamer's portrait about God. He tells the story about the father who gives to the younger son his inheritance, knowing that it will be spent in the far country away from the father's home. And Jesus tells about the young man coming to himself and coming home. To show how we resist the real truth of this parable, you probably have heard it preached on as the parable of the prodigal son illustrating conversion, the son out in the far country having sinned grievously, comes to himself. Oh, my dear friends, he was not converted in the far country. Coming to himself in this story only means that he wised up. He sat down and took account of his circumstances and he said, "Look, I'm hungry and destitute. No one is giving me anything. And the hired servants of my father are better off than me." So, he memorized a speech. He was still scheming. He was still strategizing. He still wanted to be in control. He was not going home to love the father; he was going home to get a bunk bed and three square meals.

That boy wasn't changed until he felt the salty tears of his father. Because Jesus knew. And Jesus believed that God knew that it is only unconditional love that can transform a human personality. And the transformation took place in the light of this old father who gathered his skirts and ran down the street contrary to every good social conduct and code, and embraced the son without recrimination; rather, he threw a party.

That is Jesus' understanding of God. That is the dreamer's portrait of God so beautifully captured by Rembrandt, continuing down through the centuries to be the most profound image of God that we have as a body of Christ, as the people of God.

Can you hear it without being moved by it? As many times as you have heard it, is not that God, is that not amazing? Is it not true that that transforming love alone can change a person? Or change the world? But, Jesus, of course, painted the portrait because he was encountering the anger of those who purportedly were the advocates of God. And so he told of the elder son, as well, the elder son who came in from the field and saw the party and, finding out that the father was throwing the party for the son who had returned, was offended and grew angry.

I'll give you a mystery to think about. This is a mystery. Why is it that unconditional love and grace proffered elicits such anger? Jesus painted the picture of the elder son as well to whom the father went out and pleaded, without recrimination to him, saying, "Son, everything I have is yours. Come in! It is simply good that we celebrate. Your brother is home and he's safe." Why is it that grace and love promiscuously offered in the name of a prodigal God elicits anger? Jesus must have understood this, as well. Maybe the elder son has his counterpart in the Prophet Jonah in the Old Testament. Remember that story? God says to Jonah, "Go to Nineveh, a foreign city and a pagan people, and preach there." And Jonah took a boat and went the other way. Not because he was afraid to preach, but because he knew that if he preached and Nineveh heeded, God would forgive Nineveh. And Jonah didn't really want God to forgive Nineveh. Jonah really wanted God to damn Nineveh. But finally, you know, when you're in the whale of a belly, ... you reconsider, and so he went and he preached. And it's just like he suspected. Nineveh heeded the word of God and repented. And just as he suspected, God being an old softy, spared the city. And if you take that little book of Nineveh, if you can find it in the Minor Prophets, only four chapters, look at the 4th verse of the 4th chapter - Jonah is pouty, and God comes and says, "Jonah, do you do well to be angry?"

"Yes!" So, Jonah takes his place over in the hill overlooking the city and the sun is hot. God causes a gourd to grow up to give him shade. Jonah's happy. Next morning, God creates a little worm that gnaws at the gourd and the gourd wilts and falls down and the sun blasts Jonah in the face again, who is angry. God says, "Jonah, do you do well to be angry at the gourd?"

"Yes!"

"Well, Jonah, if you're angry about a gourd that was here yesterday and is gone today, how do you think I feel about all the people of Nineveh? Don't you know that I care for them, too? Don't you know that they, too, are my children? Don't you know that my heart of compassion would embrace them as well?"

Jesus was consumed by his understanding of God, which was a God that would exclude no one, that would embrace everyone, Whose compassion knows no limit, Whose mercy is as broad as the whole human family. And so, in the face of the anger, he told this story, and the story is just this, dear friends. God has one deep passionate desire - God wants you home. God wants you home. That's all.