

Last week I talked a little bit about my process for writing a sermon, what makes for an easy week, what makes for a tough week, and so forth. This week fooled me. I saw that the Gospel was the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son; I saw that both the Psalm and the Epistle verses dealt with God's forgiveness and our gratitude and I thought, "Hat trick! This one will be easy!" And, indeed, I'm going to talk about some of that. But early in the week, I read an e-mail, an "e-zine" that I get every week about the upcoming lectionary verses from a Canadian humorist and theologian named Ralph Milton. Milton's e-mail referenced a book called The Return of the Prodigal Son by Fr. Henri Nouwen. I first read some of Nouwen's works when I was in seminary and always got a great deal out of his writing but I'd not read this particular book, so I popped down to Barnes and Noble to buy a copy, figuring I'd have plenty of time to read it this week, since this was going to be such an easy sermon. I'll bet you already know what's coming, don't you? Reading Nouwen's book completely disarranged my plans. Using Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal's return as inspiration, Nouwen walks his readers through an examination of the story from the points-of-view of the two sons and of the father. That in itself is not too radical and, indeed, pretty much matched my own plans. But it's Nouwen's conclusion that made me have to rethink part of what I wanted to say today. For Nouwen, the story serves not only as an illustration of the two halves of Jesus' audience as he told this story on his journey to Jerusalem, but also as a calling to all of his disciples, us included, to find our ultimate goal in the imitation of the father.

Jesus gives the clue to true center of the story right up front. "There was a man who had two sons," he says, not "there was a young man who treated his family badly." When we call this story "the parable of the prodigal son," we are putting the emphasis on the wrong character already. Perhaps we should call it "the parable of the Loving Father with Two Lost Sons." It might have been easier for Jesus' first audience to hear it that way as they would have been very familiar with stories of a father with two sons and the rivalry between them. Think of Adam with Cain and Abel, or Abraham with Ishmael and Isaac, or Isaac with Esau and Jacob, or even Jacob's twelve sons. In each of those instances, it is the younger brother who is beloved and who eventually emerges as the victor in the story. Of course, Jesus provides his own twists. The younger brother here is not successful as were Isaac, Jacob or Joseph, but comes home defeated, with his tail tucked between his legs. Nor is the older brother banished to another country like Cain, Ishmael or Esau, but welcomed into the feast, though we do not know for sure whether he accepts the invitation.

There are a couple of other points in the story that may not resonate for us in the same way in which they did for those first hearers. First, there is the extremity of the younger son's request for his inheritance. Today, we may hear this as an unfortunate but certainly not uncommon request of a young man for his college trust fund to be emptied so he can go play in Europe for a year, or the like. But in that agrarian economy and culture, such a request meant that the family farm, the family's very livelihood, had to be divided and a portion sold, with negative results for the whole clan. Also, inheritances were only to be distributed at the death of the father. The young man is essentially saying, "Drop dead, Pops. And tough luck to the rest of you. I'm taking mine and getting out now." The New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey writes on just how outrageous the son's behavior is: "For over fifteen years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has always been

## A Story on the Journey

emphatically the same... the conversation runs as follows: Has anyone ever made such a request in your village? Never! Could anyone make such a request? Impossible! If anyone ever did, what would happen? His father would beat him, of course! Why? The request means – he wants his father to die.” Understanding the enormity of the son’s transgression also helps us to understand the father’s response to his son’s approach upon the boy’s return. Had he not hastened to welcome the boy and reclaim him as his own, the villagers and extended family who saw him, who had been shamed by his actions, would have beaten and even killed the returning wastrel.

Although these resonances may not be as strong for us, there are plenty of other points at which we can easily enter this story and find ourselves in the scenario. I have heard many sermons over the years, and I dare say you have as well, in which we are invited to identify with the younger son. It’s a pretty easy jump for some of us. We may have passed through a period in our lives when we went off to a far country, literally or metaphorically, out from under the watchful eye of parents and community, and sown our wild oats, only to have come to our senses later on and returned, somewhat abashed, to the welcome of those who loved us. Of course, even a mild version of the younger son’s story in our own lives is not necessary for us to understand him. The seeds of rebellion are always in our hearts. Richard Niell Donovan puts it well in his commentary on this passage: “The younger son is alive and well today. We all want freedom. We want to do what we want to do when we want to do it. We chafe at accountability and resent supervision. We imagine that we could make it big if only...”

What on earth impels us to do this? Why should we have this urge to leave the places we are loved and travel into the dark to prove ourselves, going (as the old country song puts it) “lookin’ for love in all the wrong places”? Both Fr. Nouwen and the young theologian of the Emergent Church, Donald Miller, point to a possible answer. We have forgotten, or been convinced by the world around us to forget, that we are the beloved, that our Creator values us for who and what we are. Separated from this essential understanding of our own nature, we go rushing pell-mell, hither and yon, to prove that we are good at something, to show that we have value to our comrades and to ourselves, to ensure, as Miller puts it in his book Searching for God Knows What, that we can stay as passengers in the lifeboat of life and not get tossed to the sharks. Is there one of us here today, I wonder, that has not felt the existential angst of having to prove our own value to ourselves and to the hostile universe that seems to surround us? I suspect not. When we fall into this trap, it is only by realizing that we cannot validate ourselves and by returning to the loving arms of our Mothering Father God that we can find peace and fulfillment. That is when we enter the Celebration of God for God always values us and always welcomes us to our proper place in the Kingdom. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome that the Holy Spirit is always “bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”

Of course, as we remember that we are heirs it is important to remember that we are not sole heirs, which brings us to the elder brother. I’ve heard a few sermons on this subject, too, although not as many, which challenge the congregation not to become like the older brother or, by extension, the Pharisees whose challenge provoked this story in the first place. Becoming resentful of what seems like someone else’s undeserved good fortune shouldn’t be hard for us to understand, if we are honest, no more so than the younger son’s rebellious ways. I have been

like the rebellious younger son at points in my life but I am literally an older brother. I confess before you all today that I have been jealous of my younger siblings at times in my life – angry when they seemed to get away with misbehavior that would have earned me harsh punishment, resentful when they seemed to benefit more from a parent’s loving attention than I. It’s an ugly streak in me that I’m not proud of. It reminds me, as does Jesus’ parable, of the powerful play by Peter Shaffer, *Amadeus*. In Shaffer’s play, the composer Antonio Salieri recalls his own early desire to serve God with his music:

“Already when I was ten a spray of sounded notes would make me dizzy almost to falling! By twelve, I was stumbling about the fields of Lombardy humming my arias and anthems to the Lord. My one desire was to join all the other composers who had celebrated His glory through the long Italian past!... Every Sunday I saw Him in church, painted on the flaking wall. I don’t mean Christ. The Christs of Lombardy are simpering sillies with lambkins in their arms. No: I mean an old candle-smoked God in a mulberry robe, staring at the world with dealer’s eyes. Tradesmen had put him up there. Those eyes made bargains, real and irreversible. “You give me so – I’ll give you so! No more. No less.” The night before I left Legnago forever, I went to see Him and made a bargain with Him myself! I was a sober sixteen, filled with a desperate sense of *right*. I knelt before the God of Bargains, and I prayed through the moldering plaster with all my soul. ‘*Signore*, let me be a composer! Grant me sufficient fame to enjoy it. In return, I will live with virtue. I will strive to better the lot of my fellows. And I will honor You with much music all the days of my life!’ As I said *Amen*, I saw His eyes flare. ‘*Bene*. Go forth, Antonio. Serve Me and mankind, and you will be blessed!’... ‘*Grazie!*’ I called back. ‘I am your servant for life!’”

Salieri, just as the older brother, has mistaken the relationship God wants with him. Like the older brother, who complains that he has slaved for his father, Salieri sees himself as a servant, paying off a bargain. He comes to his resentment when he meets and hears the work of a more talented composer, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, whose middle name, of course, means “beloved of God. As he realizes that Mozart, the younger, seemingly unworthy son, has received an inheritance much greater than his, Salieri declares war on God and on his beloved.

“*Capisco!* I know my fate. Now for the first time I feel my emptiness as Adam felt his nakedness.... Tonight at an inn somewhere in this city stands a giggling child who can put on paper, without actually setting down his billiard cue, casual notes which turn my most considered ones into lifeless scratches. *Grazie, Signore!* You gave me the desire to serve You – which most men do not have – then saw to it that the service was shameful in the ears of the server. *Grazie!* You gave me the desire to praise You which most men do not feel-then made me mute. *Grazie tante!* You put into me the perception of the Incomparable – which most men never know! – then ensured that I would know myself forever mediocre. *Why! What is my fault?* ... Until this day I have pursued virtue with rigor. I have labored long hours to relieve my fellow men. I have worked and worked the talent You allowed me. *You know how hard I’ve worked!* Solely that in the end, in the practice of the art, which alone makes the world comprehensible to me, I might hear Your Voice! And now I do hear it – and it says only one name: MOZART! ... Spiteful, sniggering, conceited, infantile Mozart – who never worked one minute to help another man! (Smut)-talking Mozart... *Him* You have chosen to be Your sole conduit! And *my* only reward – my sublime privilege – is to be the sole man alive in this time who shall clearly recognize Your

Incarnation! *Grazie e grazie ancora!* So be it! From this time we are enemies, You and I! I'll not accept it from you – *do you hear?* They say God is not mocked. I tell You, *Man* is not mocked! ... I am not mocked! ... They say the Spirit bloweth where it listeth: I tell you NO! It must list to virtue or not blow at all! *Dio ingiusto*, You are the Enemy! I name Thee now-- *Nemico Eterno!* And this I swear: To my last breath I shall block You on earth as far as I am able! What use, after all, is man, if not to teach God His lessons!"

In Shaffer's play, the outrage of the hard-working son at the lenient mercy of his father toward the younger prodigal becomes the murderous rage of Cain versus Abel. Salieri plots the destruction of Mozart, just as the Pharisees and the chief priests, who are so incensed at the mercy Jesus shows towards the outcasts, plot the death of the one who is both the beloved son and the instrument of the Father's grace. By the way, I was listening to recordings of both Mozart's and Salieri's music as I wrote this. It is part of the tragedy of the story of Salieri that his music is far from mediocre – it is very good, both moving and charming. God had indeed blessed him; he had nothing to be ashamed of in his music. How often do we denigrate our own God-given gifts, jealous because we covet the gifts of another over our own? How often do we miss the fact that God has blessed us, does love us? All that He has is ours.

But as much as we may identify with either the younger brother or the older brother or both and as much as we have to learn from their stories, I now share the conviction of Henri Nouwen that it is the father who is our role model in this story. Whether we begin our journey from the place of the older son or the younger, we should be on the road to becoming the Father. Nouwen wrote, "As the returned child of God who is invited to resume my place in my Father's home, the challenge now, yes the call, is to become the Father myself." Surely this is what Jesus wanted to tell those judgmental Pharisees who were tut-tutting over his choice of dining companions but perhaps it is also what he wanted to tell the tax collectors who were ready to stand up for their rights as forgiven younger sons against the righteous Pharisees. All parties in attendance that day and this need to extend welcoming arms to each other if the Creation of God is to become whole. The love of God for one does not diminish the love of God for another, nor is the place of one endangered by the arrival of another. But we can only move from the path of rivalry when we begin to pattern ourselves after the father rather than the sons.

As long as we are following in the steps of one of the sons, we are wounding the Father. It is true whether we are employing the callous independence of the younger son or the outraged self-righteousness of the elder. In either case, we have declared God, as well as those who stand in opposition to us, *Nemico Eterno*, our eternal enemy. But Jesus calls us away from blame-laying and hardness of heart to expansive compassion, to be just like the Father. Earlier in his Gospel, Luke records this saying of Jesus: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate."

At the end of his book, Henri Nouwen focuses on three attributes which can bring us closer to modeling God's own compassion: grief, forgiveness and generosity. We must grieve when we see pain in the world, he says, because this opens our hearts to be ready to welcome and love all those with whom we come in contact. This is so because as we grieve, we will come to recognize that all humankind shares in the pain in the world. Even those who we may initially see as evildoers have their own pain, pain that is likely the source of their actions which are hurtful to others. We must be ready to forgive, as many as seventy times seven, Jesus said, because Our Father forgives unconditionally, just as the loving father in the parable. It is important to notice that the father's actions towards the younger son upon his return, running to him heedless of his own dignity, throwing his arms around him and kissing him, claiming him as his own and declaring his love for him, all these things happen before the son is able to begin his apology. God's forgiveness is not contingent upon our actions and neither, as we learn to become like God, should our forgiveness be contingent. Finally, just as the father showers the returned son with gifts and reminds his older son that "everything I have is yours," we must be generous with those whom we have forgiven. Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," and "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the Good News, will save it."

Jesus also said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." To become like the Father, we have Jesus as our guide. If we indeed want to "follow him more nearly, day by day," he has shown us the way and we are promised the strength to be able to follow. In his second letter to the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." We carry the Good News, the good news that all men and women are invited to the celebration of God, that all of us can become like our Mothering Father God, who loves us all despite our rebellion or our self-righteousness, whose love will never, ever let us go. Thanks be to God!