

“The Return of the Prodigal Son”  
Northside Church of Christ  
September 28, 2008

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He was born on July 15, 1606 in the Netherlands. As a young boy he attended Latin School and later enrolled in the University of Leiden. After becoming an apprentice of a famous painter, he opened up his own art studio with his friend Pieter Lastman in Amsterdam. This would begin a very successful career for a young man that we know today as the famous Dutch painter, Rembrandt. **[Slide #2]**

One critic of Rembrandt's work writes the following:

Many Rembrandt biographers describe him as a proud young man, strongly convinced of his own genius and eager to explore everything the world has to offer; an extrovert who loves luxury and is quite insensitive toward those about him. There was no doubt that his main concern was money. He made a lot and spent a lot as well. A large part of his energy was wasted in long, drawn-out court cases about financial settlements and bankruptcy proceedings. **[Slide #3]**

The self-portraits painted during his late twenties and early thirties reveal Rembrandt as a man hungry for fame and adulation, fond of extravagant costumes, preferring golden chains to the traditional starched white collars, and sporting outlandish hats, berets, helmets and turbans. Although much of this elaborate dressing-up can be explain as a normal way to practice and show off painting techniques, it also demonstrates an arrogant character who wasn't simply out to please his sponsors.

However, after a short period of success and great wealth, Rembrandt faced hard times. After losing his son Rumbartus in 1635, his first daughter Cornelia in 1638 and his second daughter Cornelia in 1640, Rembrandt's wife Saskia also died in 1642. He is left alone with his nine-month-old Titus. After an unhappy relationship with his second wife, she is confined to a mental asylum. His third wife bears him another son who dies in 1652 and another daughter who would survive him.

His popularity as a painter plummeted, even though he was recognized as one of the greatest painters of his time. In 1656 Rembrandt declared himself insolvent in order to avoid bankruptcy. Everything he had was sold during three auctions in the late 1650's.

His third wife died in 1663 and he witnessed the marriage and burial of his beloved son Titus. When Rembrandt died in 1669, he was a poor and lonely man. Despite these hardships, Rembrandt was not embittered instead they had a purifying effect on his way of looking at life. These experiences changed him in a powerful way. **[Slide #4]**

Near the end of his life, Rembrandt painted one of his most famous paintings, “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” Throughout his career he painted self-portraits and other works that tell us a lot about himself. At age thirty he painted himself with his wife Saskia in a brothel in the red light district of Amsterdam. He lifted up a half empty glass as if to toast to an undisciplined life given over to the desires of the flesh. While carefully studying this portrait, it is hard to imagine Rembrandt then painting himself thirty years later as the prodigal son. [Slide #5]

### **The Prodigal Son – Luke 15:11-31**

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' "

[Slide #6]

### **Part I – The Younger Son, Leaving vs. Homecoming**

Before we can truly understand the homecoming of the prodigal son, we must first understand what it meant for him to leave home. To understand the beauty of the father's compassion we must first understand the reality that evokes it.

The younger son said, “*give me my share of the estate.*” Luke says it in a way that is so matter-of-fact that we miss the point. Not only does the younger son ask for a division of the inheritance but he asks for the right to dispose of his part. According to the customs of the day, the father could divide the inheritance between the sons yet he still had the right to live off the proceeds. In other words, the younger son is saying “I cannot wait for you to die.” His request was a heartless rejection of the home where he had been loved and nurtured.

As a part of this radical rejection, the younger son leaves for a *distant country*. His desire to see the world is larger than his appreciation for his upbringing and the teaching he has received from his father. More than youthful disrespect, his flight to a *distant country*, his flight is a rejection of family values.

***Just like the prodigal son***, many of us have rejected God’s plan for our lives. We deny his love and teaching and head off to a distant country, wanting to see and experience what the world has for us. In the same way, we are taking the life that God has given us and we use it to please ourselves and our own selfish desires instead of pleasing our heavenly Father. When we choose to do wrong, we are living as though we do not have a home. With every wrong decision we make, we are moving farther and farther away from our home with God. If we are like the prodigal son, we can no longer deny the reality that we belong to God. We belong at home. [Slide #7]

## **Part II – The Older Son, Jealous Contempt**

The parable tells us that the father has two sons: a younger one and an older one. The older son did not ask for his share of the inheritance. He was content with living in his father’s house. In fact, when the younger son returned home, the older son was working in his father’s fields.

Rembrandt’s painting so creatively captures the posture of the older son. He is much like his father. However in this moment, he is not partaking of the welcoming of his younger brother. He has a stern, cold look on his face. While his father bends over to receive his brother, he stands to the side in contempt. Rembrandt’s painting might as well be called the Parable of the Lost Sons” because the older son seems lost in anger and resentment. Even though he is at home, he looked little like his father. He did all that a good son was supposed to do but he was not like his father.

The lostness of the younger son is more obvious because it is displayed in outwards actions. However, the lostness of the older son is just as condemning even though it is an inward lostness. In a moment that was cause of great joy for his father, the young man felt a sense of self-righteousness and pride. His self-pitied words reveal his inward condition: *Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!*

*Just like the older son*, many times we get caught up in our own pride and self-righteousness. We are model children of our Father. We do all that is required of God's children. We work the fields, we obey our Father and we never leave home. Yet, even though we have not left for a distant country, our hearts are far from home. We can live with our Father and not share His joy for an unrepentant child. We can be His child and still be far from what He wants us to be. So beware, let it not be said of those of us who have not left for a distant country, "they honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Isaiah 29:13). **[Slide #8]**

### **Part III – The Father, Boundless Love and Compassion**

The Parable of the Prodigal Son paints a powerful picture of who our God is. As we explore the gravity of the son's rejection, we come to understand the boundless love and compassion of our heavenly Father.

Rembrandt expresses with many details the son's need to return home. His head has been shaved, he has lost his outer garments, his sandals are worn. The only thing of value with which the lost son returns home is his sword. This sword for Rembrandt represents his right of sonship. All the while the lost son pleads with his father to treat him as one of the hired hand, he is invoking his right of sonship. He does so because he has nothing else – no wealth or land, only the realization that he is his father's son.

When we come to our Father, we come with empty hands – we have nothing to offer Him for He already has everything. Whatever we have that we could offer our Father has been given to us by Him. In this we see the boundless love and compassion of our Father. Despite our wholehearted rejection of Him, His plan for our lives and His love, once again the Father is filled with compassion, runs out to meet us, embraces us and kisses us. *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!* (1 John 3:1). **[Slide #9]**

### **Conclusion:**

Quite possibly today, you are like the younger son:

Henri Nouwen writes, "I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found. Why do I keep ignoring the place of true love and persist in looking for it elsewhere? Why do I keep leaving home where I am a child of God, the Beloved of my Father? I am constantly surprised at home I keep taking the gifts God has given me – my health, my intellectual and emotional gifts – and keep using them to impress people, receive affirmation and praise, and compete for rewards, instead of developing them to the glory of God. Yes, I often carry them to a distant country and put them in the service of an exploiting world that does not know their true value. It's almost as if I want to prove to myself and to my world that I do not need God's love, that I can make a life on my own, that I want to be fully independent. It is a rebellion that makes me dissipate myself in a distant country."

If that is the case, then today is the day for you to come to your Father's home. Today is the day to stop rejecting God's boundless love for you! It is a day for homecoming!

Quite possibly today, you are like the older brother:

You live in your Father's house. In fact, you are a model Christian. People look up to you and want to be like you. Externally you look much your Father. However, you've realized that your heart is far from God. The reality that your heart is far from home are the different manifestations of pride and self-righteousness, possibly contempt and anger. Today is the day to change. Today is the day that you can decide to become like your Father. We must understand that just because we are at home, this does not mean that we are like our Father.

Quite possibly today, you do not identify yourself with the younger brother, nor the older brother. It is my hope that more and more of us each day can identify ourselves with the Father.

We are not God and we will never be God. But we must become like Him and imitate Him. Once the Father has received you, embraced you and welcomed you back home, it is your turn to be a part of this homecoming process for others. Though we are like both the younger and the older son, we are not remain them. In the church we are accustomed to talking about which son are we when the question is, are we willing to be like the Father?

Do I want to be like the Father? Do I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home, but also the one who welcomes home; not just the one who received compassion, but the one who offers it as well?

Perhaps the most difficult thing Jesus ever said is found in Luke 6:36 where he says, "Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate." God's compassion is described by Jesus not simply to show me how willing God is to feel for me, or to forgive me of my sins and offer me new life and happiness, but to invite me to become like God and to show the same compassion to others he is showing to me.

So whether I am the younger or elder son, I am the son of my compassionate Father. I am an heir. I am called to show compassion like my heavenly Father.

I want to challenge you this morning, if you have not answered the father's invitation home to do so. If you are in your Father's house but your heart is far from God, to return to your Father's embrace. And if you have once seen yourself as the younger or the elder son, I want to encourage you this morning to put yourself in the place of the Father and mediate God's love and grace to a dying world.