

Coming to our senses: Letting go, and letting God

A sermon preached by Canon Rick Cross on March 18, 2007, at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Sometimes it takes a certain song, or book, or movie, or story, or painting to help connect us to God. Maybe our hearts have to be ripe for being touched, perhaps there is a vulnerability factor, a timing of the soul when God's computer images come very clear on our screen, and we get the message.

It was like that for the Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen, former professor at Harvard, who was on retreat at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1986. After being captivated by a poster of Rembrandt's "The Return of Prodigal Son" he had seen on the wall in someone's office, two years later he found himself able to spend several hours meditating on the original masterpiece which had been purchased by Catherine the Great in 1766 for the Hermitage. This extraordinary spiritual experience became the subject of his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, published in 1992.

In the painting, Rembrandt shows a man in a great red cloak tenderly touching the shoulders of a disheveled boy kneeling before him. Nouwen was drawn into the painting by the intimacy between the two figures, the warm red of the man's cloak, the golden yellow of the boy's soiled and tattered tunic, and the mysterious light engulfing them both. At that particular time in Nouwen's life, he was exhausted and confused about a contemplated vocational change. "The tender embrace of father and son," he writes, "expressed everything I desired at that moment. The son-come-home was all I was and all that I wanted to be... I desired only to rest safely in a place where I could feel a sense of belonging, a place where I could feel at home." (P.5)

Nouwen's journey led him to resign his position at Harvard, to live for an intern year as chaplain at L'Arche, a residential community of mentally handicapped adults in France, and eventually to accept a call to be the pastor of a similar community in Toronto. These were life-changing experiences for this former academic, who writes that for the first time in his life, as he meditated on the painting, he moved from being an observer of the spiritual life, as the four other figures Rembrandt painted in the shadowy backdrop of his masterpiece, to stepping into the center, kneeling down, and letting himself be held by a forgiving God.

Perhaps the first and most direct lesson we can learn from Jesus' marvelous story, in our personal Lenten reflection, is that God is approachable. God is always waiting to welcome us home. Wherever your journey has led you afar, whatever circumstances in your life make you feel distant, alienated, and separated from love, God is dying to have you back where you belong.

With which character in the story do you identify? Does the rebellious younger son dramatize your feelings toward God the parent or grandparent, who holds all the power, authority, control and expectations over you and your life? Or does the resentful older brother strike a chord of

hidden self-righteousness, false piety, judgmentalism, and envy in your heart? Or perhaps you are in a place in a relationship that calls for bold forgiveness, and you stand like the father, gazing at a guilty person, yet afar off.

I encourage you to take some time with this powerful story during the next week. Ask the Holy Spirit to go with you into the scene, and to meet each of the characters, as you try out their roles in your own spiritual life.

It was Nouwen's book that led me to think about my own attitude at a point in my life when I remember feeling rather self-righteous and resentful, like the older brother. I had developed a close friendship with a younger student in college who came to visit me two years after I had graduated and was teaching at Lincoln Academy in Damariscotta, Maine. I had always done well in school, considered myself a successful young professional, and confess having a rather condescending attitude toward John, who had dropped out of college, was having some emotional problems, had become alienated from his family, and was drifting around the country with his guitar, and duffle bag full of philosophy books on existentialism.

John was brutally honest to confess that he had lost his faith in God and Christianity, while I maintained an unquestioned party-line brand of my inherited religion. I was impatient in arguing about faith with him, and while our relationship deepened during the next year we lived together, I realized I resented John's openness and honesty and freedom to question my beliefs. He always accepted me, while challenging my beliefs. I was not secure enough in my own faith to accept him. After all, his life style was erratic, irresponsible, and that of a romantic gypsy. Mine was traditional, conservative, rather straight-laced, and respectable.

However, there was one big problem where my theological understanding broke down. While John claimed that he didn't believe in God or share my faith, he showed me greater love as a brother than I had ever experienced from another human being. Later, as I matured, I came to my senses, confessed my self-righteousness, thanked God for the great gift of love I had experienced from John, and came home into a new, deeper, and more genuine love relationship with God.

It is easy to become absorbed in the wonderful drama and action of this story, and to miss the precipitating circumstances that led Jesus to tell it. Why did he tell it to his disciples? What was its purpose in the first place? And what is the good news for us today?

“All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus' ministry was conducted in the context of a Middle Eastern culture and religion with strict social class boundaries, dietary rules and worship practices. The Pharisees and scribes seemed to have lost the spirit of the laws they prided themselves on observing to the letter. Their personal and spiritual identity was at stake in maintaining the status quo of Conservative Judaism. Their greatest joy was doing the right thing, with the right people, perfectly, in public. The well-

deserved and earned reward was God's approval. They really thought and acted like they had arrived.

Then in walked Jesus. He didn't fit the mold or expectations of a young model rabbi. While he wowed even the elders with his insightful and authoritative teaching, his vision for mission and outreach was way too radical for the protectors of the faith, especially the scribes and Pharisees.

Sin was understood as breaking the laws, and an elaborate system of sacrifices and punishments had been created to reconcile offenders with the faith community, and thereby, with God. Jesus seemed to redefine sin as being lost, alienated from community and separated from the wholeness implicit in God's love. His mission was to seek out and to save from separation those who were suffering and outside the boundaries the religious leaders had drawn.

And the scribes and Pharisees grumbled. Tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, prisoners, women, children, the mentally and emotionally ill, strangers, foreigners, Gentiles! ***"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them..... [and they] were coming near to listen to Jesus."***

Jesus set the high standard of radical hospitality, which we are challenged to practice here in this Cathedral and in this city. The distinction between saints and sinners is totally obscured in Christ. We are all sinners. We are all lost from time to time. We do things we ought not do, and leave undone things we ought to do. We do not love our neighbors as ourselves and too easily stereotype people who look and dress and act and speak differently than we do, as strangers of lesser value and importance, as outsiders, unconsciously thinking as Jesus' critics did, that *they* are the sinners.

Of course they are. And so are we. And Jesus welcomed all of us, and was teaching us to welcome them in his name. Seeking the face of Christ in every human being God brings to us is the Benedictine standard we must adopt. It may be easier for some of us than others, but together we can help each other grow deeper into this life style of Christ-like hospitality.

I quote from *Bread for the Journey*, another of Nouwen's books:

"Every good relationship between two or more people, whether it is friendship, marriage or community, creates space where strangers can enter and become friends. Good relationships are hospitable. When we enter into a home and feel warmly welcomed, we will soon realize that the love among those who live in that home is what makes that welcome possible.... True hospitality is an opportunity for the stranger to feel safe and discover his or her own gifts. It is also and foremost an expression of love between the hosts."

All this is theory, unless one has experienced the path of repentance that the prodigal son followed. Have you ever "come to your senses," acknowledged being lost or broken or separated from God's love, and turned around to come home? Henri Nouwen felt the father's forgiving and

welcoming embrace. Letting go of control in a relationship, “letting go and letting God” as those in recovery programs say, and accepting forgiveness to become reconciled to God and other human beings, is to experience God’s radical hospitality. Only then, will it become natural to extend it to others.

In the Ash Wednesday liturgy, is the invitation to a holy Lent, inviting you to use the sacrament of confession, absolution and anointing, by making a time to meet with a priest for spiritual counsel and healing. In the *Book of Common Prayer* it is called “Reconciliation of a Penitent,” and Form Two found on page 451, concludes with this prayer by the priest:

“Now there is rejoicing in heaven; for you were lost, and are found; you were dead, and now alive in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And they began to celebrate. Amen.