

## **Coming Home** **Luke 15:11-24**

### **The Return of the Prodigal Son (Rembrandt)**

Let me show you a painting. Do you know what this painting is? This painting is “The Return of the Prodigal Son” by Rembrandt. This is the final work of Rembrandt and he completed this painting within two years of his death. Take a moment and look at this painting. What do you see? Keep it in your mind while you listen to my sermon.

### **A Lost Son 1!**

Today’s scripture is a famous biblical story which everyone knows. Some call this “the parable of the prodigal son.” Some call it the story of a loving father. Or it could be a story of a family reunion. According to the Scripture, a man had two sons. The younger one said to his father, “Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.” He requested his inheritance. In other words, He was saying “Father, I wish you were dead so that I could get my inheritance now.” His action was not only immoral and shameful, but he also could be punished by death according to Jewish law. Of course, his words and actions broke his father’s heart. Eventually, this younger son left the house and wandered a foreign land. The poor father lost his young son. He still had his elder son with him, but he couldn’t be the same after his younger son had left.

Since I don’t have a child, I can only imagine how a father would feel if his son was like this prodigal son. So I asked other pastors at my Monday lectionary study group. One pastor shared his own story. His family immigrated to the United States when he was a teenager. Of course, moving to a new country during the teenage years was not easy. He struggled and so did his younger brother who was a troublemaker. His father was a pastor and very gentle and never yelled at his children even when they made trouble except on one occasion. One day, his brother came home bleeding from a gunshot wound. His friend accidentally shot him. His father wanted to take him to a hospital, but his brother refused to go because his friend could be arrested. After an argument, his father yelled for him to “If you don’t want to listen me, get out and go to your friends whom you want to protect!” and his brother ran out of the house. Less than a half-hour later, his father in a shivering voice asked my friend to join him in looking for his brother. His father was wailing like an animal and calling his brother’s name. They found his brother crying beside a garbage dumpster behind their apartment. My friend thought that his brother would be scolded, but his father went to him and said, “I am sorry son. Let’s go home.” His father embraced his brother crying. That is the heart of a loving father.

The parable does not tell us about what this father did after his younger son left but we can guess how he was doing. He might have searched for his lost son in neighboring towns. After he couldn’t hear about him, he might just have waited for him every day.

Certainly, the younger son was a lost son who ran away from the house and wasted everything he had received from his father. He forgot who he was and ended up in a pig slop. Yes. He was the lost son. When the younger son hit the bottom of his life, he finally remembered his father. He thought “I’ll go back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ Then he got right up and went home to his father. The father was waiting for his son. “When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him.” This is the father’s love that embraces his children without questions.

Let us look at the painting again. What do you see? In the painting, the son has returned home. How does he look? His shoes are worn off. He had lost his hair and was in a wretched state from his difficult journey. How is the father doing? The father receives him with a gentle gesture. Some say that his hands represent both mothering and fathering at once. The left hand appears larger and more masculine while the right is softer and more receptive. What else do you see? How about his eyes? His eyes are closed while the other people in the painting stare at the younger one. Why are his eyes closed? Some interpret his closed eyes as signifying that the father did not ask any questions or judge his younger son, but just embraced him. Just like God embraced us without condition, the father didn't see the sin and guilt of the lost son. God's sympathy and love forgave and embraced the lost son into the family again. This is good news for us.

## **A Lost Son 2**

However, there is another lost son in the story. You can guess who he is. The elder son was with the father and remained at the house but he was also a lost son. When his younger brother returned and the father celebrated with a great feast, the elder son was furious and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't listen. The son said, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!" This son was with his father and had worked very hard for his father's house and never disobeyed his father's commands. That's good. But what he said did not sound like son's words. He sounded more like a hired person or a slave. The elder brother was angry because he did not feel that he was properly rewarded for his work and services. He thought he deserved blessing because he had obeyed his father's commands. His act of obedience and service did not come out of love but something else. His motivation was to receive rather than show his love for his father. In addition, he did not see his brother's sin as forgivable.

Let us see the painting again. Who is the elder brother? The one who stands at the right, wearing a red garment. How do his face and eyes look? His face is stiff and he looks like a judge. Even though he was with his father at the house, he was also a lost son in some sense. He didn't feel the love of his father and misunderstood the nature of a father-son relationship. He assumed his relationship with the father was more of a business relationship. Many Christians have the elder brother syndrome. They often expect some reward for their good deeds and when they do not get the reward they expect, they get confused and angry.

There is a story. One day, Jesus said to his disciples, "bring a stone for me." He did not give any details so the disciples looked for stones they could carry. Since Jesus didn't tell how big or how many, Peter chose small pebbles and put them in his pocket because those are easy to carry. Jesus said, "follow me" and they walked. At noon, Jesus turned back to his disciples and said, "It's lunch time" and turned their stones to bread. Peter's small stones barely filled his stomach. After lunch, Jesus said once again, "bring a stone for me." Peter mumbled, "now I get it!" and he found a big rock and carried it on his back. He stumbled on the road because it was so heavy but he kept thinking "I can do it! Dinner is coming" and he plodded on. By sunset, they reached the Jordan River and Jesus said, "throw your stones into the river." When they had done this, Jesus said, "follow me!" Peter and the other disciples looked a little confused and disappointed. Jesus said, "Have you forgotten what I commanded? For whom did I tell you to bring a stone?"

As we forget why we follow Jesus and why we do God's ministry, we often expect some reward and when we don't get it, we often get confused and angry. This is a symptom of the elder brother syndrome. We can get lost even in the midst of our own religious zeal and passion. During this Lenten season, reflect on whether you have been the prodigal son or the elder son. Repentance begins with honestly facing ourselves.

## **Home**

The good news is that there is a home we can return to. There is the father who loves us no matter what. No matter whether you are like a prodigal son or the elder son, our heavenly Father embraces us, reaches out to us and invites us into his joyful banquet. His unconditional grace not only covers the sin of the prodigal son but also the sin of the elder son. That grace is our hope and that love of the father is what we return to during this season of Lent.

Let us look at the painting one last time. The Father's closed eyes symbolize not seeing the sin of his sons. His closed eyes also do not see our sin and that he will embrace us unconditionally if we return to him. So my friends, remember our father's house, the father who loves us unconditionally. If you have forgotten this for various reasons, it's time to go home for a family party. Our heavenly Father will say, "I love you, I forgive you and I am glad you're home." Isn't this good news?