

Sermon Notes, May 8, 2016
The Father's Eyes, Luke 15:20-32

In 1985, the late Henri Nouwen, a Roman Catholic priest and author of international reputation, had the opportunity to go what was then Leningrad, to the Hermitage Museum there, and view Rembrandt's painting, *"The Return of the Prodigal Son."* It was something he always wanted to do. He went and sat in the Hermitage for hours for several days and just observe this painting. This inspired him to write his book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. In it he brings together some wonderful insights.

This painting is significant. It shows the return of the Prodigal kneeling at the feet of his father. His once finely tailored and richly woven fabric robe is torn and tattered. You can see through it. It's threadbare. It hangs limply on the lean and weary body of the son. The sandals the son once wore are tattered and his feet are calloused. His head is buried in his father's robe. His head is shaved like those in the Nazi death camps—a sign of humiliation, of poverty and disease.

But one of the focal points for Henri Nouwen is one that art critics have also focused on. That is the father's eyes. When Rembrandt paints the father, embracing his son after his return home the father is an old man. He's seemingly worn out by the years of waiting and concern. He is a father whose grief has taken its toll. He has paid a price for his love. What's especially alarming is that he shows eyes that are nearly blind, eyes that are sunken, eyes hardly seem to focus. I'm no expert on art, but it's as if Rembrandt is saying, as he paints these father's eyes, that they've seen too much of the world and too much pain. That the tears together with the years of waiting for his son to come back and the straining of looking for his son on the horizon have taken their toll.

As I think of our heavenly Father, which Jesus intends us to do, I know that there's no way for any of us to escape the Father's eyes and His gaze which is always on us. Those eyes are not tired or unfocused weary eyes of an old man, but eyes that are penetrating and filled with discernment, wisdom, knowledge and love.

So I want to think with you about this parable and about this father and about his eyes. What might be reflected as he lives with his sons?

Quite honestly, first I see CARING EYES. I see a specific focus in those eyes. I want to make an obvious point. At the outset of this parable this father loves both of his sons the same. This is not a story about Jacob and Joseph and about an obvious favoritism, or about distorted love.

This is a story about a father whose eyes follow both of his sons and who cares deeply about them. I say that because one of the questions that comes when you read this story, is that from a human perspective, it seems that it lacks fairness. What the father does for this prodigal son doesn't make any sense. But, you see, fairness as we understand it, is never God's standard in human relationships. Grace is. Fairness is about what we might deserve or what we've earned or what we're entitled to, but grace is a gift that God gives. As Bailey says about the father in this story, *"Only the father is able to restore, and restoration is through grace alone. The younger son brings nothing home but a handful of filthy rags."*

Our Heavenly Father meets it out in His own way. Fairness is treating everyone the same. But grace is recognizing the differences. There isn't any favoritism in this story. The father loves both of his sons individually and uniquely. That, I believe, is how God in His grace seeks out you and me. The father here deals with each of his sons differently and yet there's an unconditional love, a pure grace, that is extended toward each. If we don't get that then we won't get the rest of the story. It is about grace. The undeserved, unmerited rich outpouring of God's love for you and for me.

I see also in this story the SAD EYES of the Father as He understands the personal cost of love and pain. Sad eyes. Sad eyes are oftentimes the price of love and free will. I guess that's the hardest part of being a parent. It's to absorb the pain. It's the hardest part of loving anyone with our whole heart and mind and soul. It's that others whom we love can make foolish choices.

Life is about choices that God has allowed us to make every single day of our lives. It's about personal choices. Those choices reflect our love. They reflect the object of our love. They reflect our commitment. Those choices are reflected in our lives. And love, if we're going to give it, leaves us very vulnerable and open to great risk and deep rejection.

This father knows what I guess we come to know as human parents, or even as spouses, that love cannot be demanded or controlled or manipulated or coerced—it can't be bought. That home really is, to some extent where the heart is.

I want you to see the difference in the way this father treats this son and everything else that Jesus says in this chapter. There is a difference in the response of the father to the openly defiant and rebellious son.

The sheep is lost out of carelessness. The Shepherd goes and won't give up until he finds that lost sheep.

The coin is lost by accident and the woman never gives up the search until she finds it.

The younger son as we saw last week should have been pursued by the elder brother.

And the older son who remained at home but now is resentful—the father goes out and begs him to come in and join the family, to be a part of the family's celebration and laughter.

The father does nothing to bring this son home. Because he knows, in one sense, he can't. This son must be "brought to his senses" by the difficult times he finds himself in. And in that to have a heart that has become softened and able to be changed. It's in that very instant when he sees his son returning his eyes change—sadness retreats and life returns to his eyes—and he runs.

The Father's eyes, as He looks on us, at times I'm sure are saddened by some of the choices that we make. And yet, He lets us go. He watches with those tears in His eyes. So many tears. Foolish choices. Beginning with your attitudes, maybe your lostness, maybe your condemnation or judgment of others through gossip, maybe it's idols of some nature that you're pursuing, and all the things we get tangled up in that we've been talking about for six or seven weeks. Fortunately, the story doesn't end there.

The Father's eyes next when we see them are SOFT EYES.

He sees his son a long way off and he is filled with compassion and runs... Kenneth Bailey says that there is no parallel in all of Middle Eastern literature for what happens next in the story—where the father comes running to embrace him.

A good case can be made biblically and culturally that this scenario would have been acted out and understood to take place, by the listeners, at the edge of the village. That's where the hostile villagers would have gathered as well. The son would have faced a hostile gauntlet. But the father makes his reconciliation public at the edge of the village. And rather than experiencing the ruthless hostility he deserves and anticipates by both village and father, the son witnesses an unexpected, visible demonstration of love in humiliation as the father runs, literally, the gauntlet for him humiliating himself and the son enters the village under the protective care of the father whose kiss signified reconciliation and forgiveness.

That's the unconditional love of God. Against indifference and arrogance and selfishness and rebellion and sin, when we turn our hearts towards him, he runs to embrace us. He's been waiting for years to do that.

There are other details here. The robe, the symbol of honor and acceptance. The ring, the sign of authority. The sandals on his feet the symbols of freedom. In all of this his sonship is restored. All given by the waiting father, who in all his actions, demonstrates radical and unexpected love and mercy!

Amy Grant sings a song called "My Father's Eyes." The chorus goes like this:

When people look inside my life

I want to hear them say, "She has her Father's eyes."

Eyes that find the good in things when good is not around.

Eyes that find the source of help when help just can't be found.

Eyes full of compassion seeing every pain.

Knowing what you're going through and feeling it the same.

Just like my Father's eyes.

One of the other parts of the painting that was fascinating to Henri Nouwen and to the experts are the hands of this father as he embraces this son, as his son kneels before him and the father lays his hands gently on his son's shoulder and back. What's interesting about this according to the critics and the experts, is that almost all of the light in the painting falls the hands of the father. The reason for that is that Rembrandt wants us to focus our eyes on the HANDS of the Father. On this embrace.

It's thought that Rembrandt is trying to communicate that the hands are reflective of the heart of the Father in their warmth and their strength and their tenderness—in their forgiveness—and in their healing and in their acceptance. And that's exactly what this story indicates to us.

This father runs to meet his son and embraces him, and in so doing, what this father does for his son, is the same thing God is willing to do to any of us who turn and come home again. This father takes upon himself the humiliation and the embarrassment that belonged, rightfully, to his son for what he had done. And he absorbs, in that instant, (this is what forgiveness is about, and in that we see the father's FORGIVING EYES!), he absorbs in that instant the years of rejection and pain and in that embrace lets the world know that his son is forgiven and belongs to him. His sonship is restored.

It would have made a lot more sense to have some kind of restitution, wouldn't it? But forgiveness is not earned! And it is not deserved! It doesn't matter how far we've come. It is a gift that God gives to us. The Father's embrace, falling on our neck with His kiss, erases the past in an instant! And new life begins.

I wonder, this morning, who the Father sees today with soft eyes? Compassionate eyes. Forgiving eyes. You need to know the Father looks on you with soft eyes if you're on your way home. He looks on you with a mixture of sad and soft eyes if you're still in that far country—still in a place of rebellion or far from him in your heart. Maybe it's time. Maybe it's time to head home. The Father is looking on you with eyes filled with compassion. Feeling every pain. Eyes willing to forgive, in order that you might begin again.

There is a final scene that we see, though it is somewhat dampened. That is the father's LAUGHING EYES. You know, in all the stories that Jesus tells in chapter 15 God turns into a partying type of person. I mean, He loves to celebrate. Every chance He gets, when someone who is lost is found He is there throwing a party and celebrating. Celebrating new life.

These three parables are primarily parables about the character of the Father. We learn from Jesus that God is the one who finds, who restores, who celebrates, and who takes risks and pays the price for the lost to be found. Jesus teaches us a fact about heaven that we could never have guessed on our own. That is that there is joyous laughter in heaven because of one single sinner who repents and who discovers the finding love of God.

So this celebration happens. It begins. The Father throws a wild party. And it doesn't seem to make much sense to us in one sense, but those who have been touched by the grace of God can read this story and smell the roast in the oven and hear the laughter of the redeemed. And to know that there's nothing, nothing worth celebrating more than one who was lost and who is found.