

LENTEN PICTURE OF THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Our Lenten picture is a small reproduction of Rembrandt's famous painting "***The Return of the Prodigal Son***" which is on display at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg in Russia. The original painting is larger than life, a huge work in oil on canvas, measuring eight feet high by six feet wide. The painting has abundant reds, browns, and yellows. It depicts shadowy recesses and a bright foreground, but most of all the light-enveloped embrace of father and son surrounded by four mysterious bystanders.

A chance encounter with this reproduction of Rembrandt's famous painting "***The Return of the Prodigal Son***" catapulted Henri Nouwen on a long spiritual adventure which he shares with his readers in his book "***The Return Of The Prodigal Son – A Story of Homecoming.***" Motivated to travel to Saint Petersburg to see the original masterpiece first-hand, Nouwen was overwhelmed by the experience. He says he discovered in the parable of the prodigal son, "*the whole Gospel,*" and shares the deeply personal and resonant meditation that led him to discover the place within where God has chosen to dwell.

In seizing the inspiration that came to him through Rembrandt's depiction of the powerful Gospel story told by Jesus, Henri Nouwen probes the several movements of the parable: 1) the younger son's return, 2) the father's restoration of sonship, 3) the elder son's vengefulness, and 4) the father's compassion. In his reflection on Rembrandt in light of his own life journey, Henri Nouwen, in his book, evokes the powerful drama of the parable in a rich, captivating way that is sure to reverberate in the hearts of readers. The themes of homecoming, affirmation, and reconciliation will be newly discovered by all who have known loneliness, dejection, jealousy, or anger. The challenge to love as the father and be loved as the son will be seen as the ultimate revelation of the parable known to Christians throughout time, and in Henri Nouwen's book, represented with a vigor and power fresh for our times. Nouwen points out, the father in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11 – 32) is a figure of the Father in heaven, whose very nature is love, forgiveness

and reconciliation. As we come to see ourselves in the younger son, the older son, and perhaps in both, we realize that we are called to be like the father as well.

For all who ask, "*where has my struggle led me?*" or for those "*on the road*" who have had the courage to embark on the journey but seek the illumination of a known way and safe passage, Henri Nouwen's book "***The Return Of The Prodigal Son – A Story of Homecoming***" will inspire and guide each time it is read. It is a beautiful book, as beautiful in the simple clarity of its wisdom as in the terrible beauty of the transformation to which it calls us.

Rembrandt's painting is also the inspiration for the Lenten booklet entitled "***From Fear To Love – Lenten Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son***" by Henri Nouwen, which is available on the table at the church entrances, for our own personal daily reflections during this season of Lent. The reflections are drawn from recorded conferences Henri Nouwen gave on the parable and the famous Rembrandt portrait of "*The Return of the Prodigal Son.*" In the booklet Henri Nouwen powerfully presents the core message of the parable: we are children of God, given our freedom by the Father, who freely loves us whether we stay or go, whether we have been unfaithful or resentful or presumptuous. As we deepen our understanding of our own sin and limitation, we appreciate all the more the boundless love that is the very essence of the Father.

Nouwen guides us to recognize the particular sin that is currently dominating us, be it the infidelity of the younger son, the stubborn resentment of the older son or the refusal to become like the forgiving father. As we become aware of our sinfulness – though this awareness may be uncomfortable at times – we begin our movement back to the Father. The reflections are ideally suited to Lenten prayer and meditation and help readers begin to experience the richness that this great parable has to offer them on their spiritual journey. Both Henri Nouwen's Lenten reflections and his book help us come to a deeper appreciation of God's unconditional love for us, revealed to us by Jesus in His timeless Gospel parable. Henri Nouwen's book "***The Return Of The Prodigal Son – A Story of Homecoming***" can be purchased at the Catholic Book Store on Waterloo Street.