



**SIX-WEEK STUDY GUIDE
TO ACCOMPANY HENRI NOUWEN'S
*THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON***

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To be human is to encounter nature, people, art, ideas. When we allow these encounters to speak to us, challenge us, change us, then we are truly human, created anew over and over by God's transforming power through the created world. As you read this book, let it speak a message to you. Let it allow you to hear how God is challenging you through this reading experience. If you accept the challenge, expect to come out of this experience closer to the person God created you to be. **HAVE A BLESSED ENCOUNTER WITH LUKE, REMBRANDT, NOUWEN AND GOD!**

Suggested approach to this study: pray and reflect on a portion of this book each day. Please remember in your prayers all the people from this parish community who are studying this book with you.

WEEK 1 - THE STORY OF THE TWO SONS AND THEIR FATHER, READ PAGES 1-23

Prologue: Encounter with a Painting, pages 3-18

The Poster: What was Henri Nouwen's life situation when he first encountered the poster of the Prodigal Son? Do you think his condition affected his response to the poster? How? Think of a low point in your own life. In the midst of your struggles, did someone/thing outside you trigger a yearning for God's comfort? Explain.

The Painting: What were the contrasts Nouwen observed in this painting? Nouwen describes Rembrandt's painting as "a gracious dance of nature and art. " What did he mean by that phrase? Apply Rembrandt's ability to cooperate with nature and produce a stunning work of art to your own desire to cooperate with God to bring forth the best in you.

The Event: According to Nouwen, what is the difference between being an observer or a participant in the spiritual journey? How does he describe "the place" of the participant? Through his new life at L'Arche, Nouwen sees himself as having moved "one little step from bystander to participant, from judge to repentant sinner, from teacher about love to being loved as the beloved." What do you need to set aside to come one step closer?

The Vision: What does Nouwen mean when he says, "I am God's home?" Take Nouwen's example and "kneel before the Father, put [your] ear against his chest and listen, without interruption, to the heartbeat of God." What is God saying to you at this time of your life?

Introduction- The Younger Son, the Elder Son, and the Father, pages 19-23

How in his life does Nouwen identify with the younger son? How does he identify with the elder son? What does it mean to be "called to become the Father." Nouwen asks us to discover within ourselves "the lost children of God ... [and] the compassionate mother and father that is God." What does he mean? Are you ready for the journey?

WEEK 2 - THE YOUNGER SON, READ PAGES 25-58

Rembrandt and the Younger Son, pages 29-33

What does Nouwen learn about Rembrandt from reflecting on his paintings? Reflect on your own spiritual journey where have you been, where are you now, where would you like to be? "[P]hysical blindness and deep inner seeing are intimately connected. " What does Nouwen mean by this statement?

The Younger Son Leaves, pages 34-44

A Radical Rejection: What does "home" mean for Nouwen? How does the painting depict Nouwen's understanding of his spiritual "home?"

Deaf to the Voice of Love: What does "leaving" mean for Nouwen? What is the great tragedy of life according to Nouwen? Reflect on the following statements: "Faith is the radical trust that home has always been there and always will be there" p. 39. "The true voice of love . . . can only be heard by those who allow themselves to be touched . . . the touch of God's blessing hand " p. 40. On page 41, Nouwen lists many signs that tell him he has left home. What are your signs that you have left home to dwell in a "distant country?"

Searching Where It Cannot Be Found: Nouwen sees in himself one who struggles with "the mistaken idea that the world defines [him]." Can you relate to Nouwen's "struggles?" How? "I am the prodigal everytime I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found." Where do you see yourself searching for unconditional love? How does the prodigal "no" reflect the Adam and Eve story? Our story? What is the mystery of life according to Nouwen? What is your response to this great mystery?

The Younger Son Returns, pages 45-58

Being Lost: What does Rembrandt's depiction and Nouwen's interpretations tell us about the prodigal son's condition? What caused the son to opt for life? What have you discovered about your deepest self as you have moved through life? What situations have you found yourself in when you have made the

greatest discoveries about yourself?

Claiming Childhood: "The way home is long and arduous." What did the son seem to know about the Father that caused him to return home? How might this help you as you seek to return home?

The Long Way Home: "One of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God's forgiveness." What does receiving forgiveness really mean? What is the role of the "beloved son?" What does it mean to become a child of God? What is Nouwen's "simplest route" to the journey home? Read and reflect on Matthew 5:1-12. Which of these beatitudes speaks the loudest to you where you are now? Why? Are you the one who mourns or are you the one who inflicts mourning/sorrowing? Are you the peacemaker or are you the one who disturbs peace? Are you the single hearted or are you the one who is distracted by all the allurements and addictions of the world? Are you the lowly/meek or are you the one who lords over others? Reflect on the rest of the beatitudes in the same way.

The True Prodigal: "There is no journey to God outside of the journey of Jesus." "Jesus is the prodigal son of the prodigal Father who gave away everything the Father had entrusted to him so that I could become like him to return with him to his Father's house." The prodigal "is no longer just one repentant sinner, but the whole of humanity returning to God." These are "wow" statements. What does Nouwen mean by them? Please take each one of them to prayer and reflection. How do you hear God speaking to you through them? Write down your reflections. Your reflections are the voice of the Holy Spirit encouraging you on your journey "home."

WEEK 3 - THE ELDER SON, PAGES 59-88

Rembrandt and the Elder Son, pages 62-66

Rembrandt's painting "summarizes the great spiritual battle and the great choices this battle demands." How would you interpret this statement by Nouwen and how are you challenged by it? How does the elder son represent the Pharisees and the scribes of scripture? Who does the younger son represent in the scriptures? How do Rembrandt's biographers divulge a Rembrandt much like the elder son? What seems to be the elder son's dominant sin? How is this predictable to one who stays home? "The hardest conversion to go through is the conversion of the one who stayed home." Do you agree with this statement by Nouwen? Explain.

The Elder Son Leaves, pages 67-76

Standing with Clasped Hands: How does Rembrandt show that the elder son is lost too?

Lost in Resentment: Anger, envy, judgment, condemnation, resentment, bitterness and jealousy are the damaging characteristics of "elder sons/daughters." Do you identify with any of these descriptives? "The lostness of the resentful "saint" is so hard to reach precisely because it is so closely wedded to the desire to be good and virtuous." Do you agree with this comment? Explain.

Without Joy: What is the terrible effect of the elder son's sin? Explain this statement: "Joy and resentment cannot coexist." Nouwen gives an example from his own life of how resentment pushes away joy. Describe his experience. Can you think of any examples from your life where resentment has kept you from the joy of God's love?

An Open-ended Question: Describe Nouwen's journey to the realization that he cannot heal/change/redeem himself. Have you reached that conclusion about yourself? If so, describe your journey to that realization.

The Elder Son's Return, pages 77-88

A Possible Conversion: We are free to make our own choices: to stay in the darkness or step into the light of God's love. Think of a time when you chose darkness. Think of a time when you

chose light. Describe what Nouwen means by the "pathology of the darkness" p. 82. What event in Nouwen's life does he see as "a true return" to the Father? What did he learn about himself?

Through Trust and Gratitude: What is one thing that you must do in your life to make the return to the Father possible? In other words, how can you prepare to be found? "Who does not thank for little will not thank for much." Explain this Estonian proverb. Do you have little to be thankful for or much? Pause now to thank God for something you experienced today. How can you live gratitude as a discipline?

The True Elder Son: What does Nouwen mean when he sees Jesus as the elder son? How is this comforting for you?

WEEK 4 - THE FATHER PAGES 89-119

Rembrandt and the Father, pages 92-97

The power of Rembrandt's painting is "that the most divine is captured in the most human." What does this mean? What does this tell you about God? About us? What are the most telling characteristics of the Father in Rembrandt's painting? What is Rembrandt's attraction to blind men all about? Compare Luke's parable with Rembrandt's painting. What is Rembrandt trying to say in his depiction of the Father? "It is precisely the immensity of the divine love that is the source of the divine suffering." Explain. How does Nouwen interpret the Father's hands? How is this comforting to you? Through whom in your life have you felt the hands of the Father blessing you? Thank the Father for these people in your life. How does Nouwen see Rembrandt's own spiritual journey?

The Father Welcomes Home, pages 99-109

Father and Mother: How do scholars interpret the hands and red cloak? Read Isaiah 49:15-16, Psalm. 91, Matthew 23:37-38 to re-enforce Rembrandt's understanding of the Father. The elder son's dilemma is "to dare to be loved as his Father longs to love him or to insist on being loved as he feels he ought to be loved." Is this your dilemma? What is this study calling you to do? How might you respond to that call?

No More or Less: Can you fathom how all of God's children are favorites. "God looks at his people as children of a family who are happy that those who have done only a little bit are as much loved as those who accomplish much." Do you like this kind of a God? Why or why not?

The Heart of God: Is your God the God who stays home and expects you to come to him or is your God the one who runs to meet you? What in your life has led you to believe the way you believe? God's mission for us is to be found by him, to be known by him, to be loved by him. Reflect on what this means for you. What in your life keeps you from believing that you are worthy of God's love? What can you do about it?

A First and Everlasting Love: How do doubts about your own goodness keep you from experiencing the joy and freedom of God's love?

The Father Calls for a Celebration, pages 110-119

Giving the Very Best: Imagine yourself being dressed in the best robe of honor, with the ring of inheritance and the sandals of prestige. How do you feel?

An Invitation to Joy: The Celebration the Father calls for is what living in the kingdom is all about. Do you have the eyes to see the joy and the ears to hear the gladness that belongs to God, which is all around you? How can you get those eyes, those ears (p. 115)? Take some time to reflect on your day; name one thing to be joyful for.

Not Without Sorrow: What are the characteristics of people of joy (p. 117, last paragraph)? Is this realistic? Why or why not? If we all lived this way, what kind of a world would we have? What does Nouwen mean when he says "that as a returned child of God, God's joy is mine to claim?" Do you see yourself as a returned child of God? Are you claiming that joy that belongs to you? Our baptism puts us in the Father's house but we are still on our way to the Father. What do think this means? For Nouwen, the ultimate goal of the spiritual life is becoming the Father. What does it mean to be the Father? How can we, who are still on our journey, still sinners, be the Father?

WEEK 5 - CONCLUSION AND EPILOGUE, PAGES 120-139

Conclusion: Becoming the Father, pages 120-133

A Lonely Step: Explain what Nouwen means by the Father as an "outsider." What is the tragedy that keeps many of us from becoming the Father? Do you see this as a problem in your life? What do you know from this study and your own experiences of the Father that will keep you from falling into the trap of irrational fear of God? How has Church and society made it difficult to claim our spiritual fatherhood/motherhood? Nouwen shows us that it is not enough to recognize only the prodigal and the elder son in us; our journey is not complete without seeing the Father in ourselves. Once we understand this, why all of a sudden does it become so obvious? Or does it? Explain.

The Fatherhood of Compassion: "To become like God is to show the same compassion to others he is showing to me." What opportunities have you had to be compassionate? Recollect as many incidents as you can when others have been compassionate to you? "The great conversion called for by Jesus is to move from belonging to the world to belonging to God." How does Jesus model becoming the Father? Compare the world's idea of fatherhood with God's.

Grief: Forgiveness and Generosity: Nouwen offers these three ways to a truly compassionate fatherhood. How does Nouwen see grief as a virtue? We can only forgive if we know we are "the Beloved Child." Explain. Generosity means being of one kind, belonging to one family. What does this understanding of the word speak to you? How does becoming the Father bring true freedom? Being present to his dying friend, helped Nouwen experience the Father's unconditional love. Being home with the Father is the criteria for being a Father. Nouwen envisions the rebellious son in himself and the resentful son in himself stepping up to the Father to receive his unconditional love. Then and only then can he be transformed into the compassionate Father, the Father that then can reach out and let his hands rest in a blessing on others.

Imagine yourself in the presence of the Father as first the

rebellious one and then the resentful one. Let the Father's hands rest on your shoulders and bless you. What are you experiencing? Now imagine yourself reaching out to someone you know in need; let your healed compassionate hands rest on their shoulder and bless them. What are you experiencing? What have you learned from this meditation? Give it time.

WEEK 6 - LIFE AFTER THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Epilogue: Living the Painting, page 134-139

How was Nouwen's experience at L'Arche an experience of the Father's unconditional love? Where have you experienced such a relationship of unconditional love? Nouwen's experience allowed him to live his understanding of Rembrandt's painting: living without fear, guilt shame, worry, free to be simply who he is. Can you consider your experience in the same light? Why or why not? "Life in community does not keep the darkness away." What does Nouwen mean by this statement? How do you see this in your own relationships? What can you do about it? What does Nouwen do about it? What does Nouwen mean when he says his "journey is far from ended." What does this mean for your spiritual journey? Is this comforting or disheartening? Explain.

Nouwen says this of the Father: "Through the many deaths he suffered, he became completely free to receive and to give." What deaths has the Father suffered? What are the spiritual deaths you might have to suffer to be the hands that do not beg, grasp, demand, warn, judge, and condemn but only bless? What does Nouwen mean by the loneliness of the Father? Is this too high a price to pay to grow up spiritually?

Rembrandt's painting took Nouwen on a long journey home. Where has this painting and Nouwen's reflection on it taken you? Spend time each day this week asking the Father to show you again what you need to hear from this parable, painting, book. Return to those places and reread and reflect. Write down your thoughts.

Thank you for praying Lent with us. May this gift from Henri Nouwen lead you into a blessed Holy Week and Easter Season.