

*“Blessed are those servants, whom their lord when he cometh shall find watching.”*

It is commonly called *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. Rembrandt’s painting is called *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Henri Nouwen’s book bears the same title, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, but provides as a subtitle, *“A Story of Homecoming”*. The missing indefinite or definite article before *homecoming* is telling. Why? Because the parable is very explicit. *“A certain man had two sons.”* There is more than one leaving and therefore the possibility of more than one homecoming. In some sense the parable is universal; it is about the homecoming of our humanity which is, in some sense, too, about our abiding in the compassionate love of the Father as Bernard of Clairvaux’s Lenten sermons on *Qui habitat*, (Psalm 91, Psalm 90 in the Vulgate) suggest. *“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide under the protection of the God of heaven.”*

Two sons. We forget that the dynamic of the story is not just with respect to the younger son but also includes the elder son. Such is the subtlety and complexity of the parable, the commentary tradition upon it, and Rembrandt’s painting, itself a kind of commentary. And in very intriguing ways.

Rembrandt’s painting focuses, to be sure, on the return of the prodigal son but that is not the actual center of the painting. The iconic scene of the son’s embrace by the Father is off-center, to the left in the painting, actually. To the right is the elder son, his face illumined, like the scene of the embrace of Father and younger son, but the center of the painting is the space between the Father’s embrace of the younger son, and the stern and critical gaze, it is fair to say, of the elder son. Unlike the prodigal son, ironically, the face of the elder son and brother is visible.

The parable is really the parable of two lost sons as Nouwen suggests. In this he is hardly unique. The interpretation of Scripture does not happen in a vacuum. And among the more intriguing interpretations of the parable are those that deal with the elder son. It seems that you don’t have to go away to be lost. The distance between the Father’s embrace of the younger son and the elder brother’s gaze is most telling.

As a parable of the lost and the found, a parable of human redemption, it has to deal with the more complex and less explicit dynamics of the elder son, too. He is the one who stayed, it seems, the one who was a faithful son, it seems, the one who never envisioned being freed of the Father at all, it seems, altogether unlike the younger son. And yet, he, too, is a lost son and in ways that are almost more disturbing and more disquieting. The commentary tradition finds ways to consider the elder son in relation to the younger son and reflects, although often rather obliquely, in my view, on the rich seam of biblical narrative that deals precisely with sibling rivalry. Nothing could be more a salient feature of the Pentateuch and beyond. What is *The Book of Genesis* but a recurring refrain of sibling rivalry and tension, of brother against brother? Cain and

Abel, Abram and Laban, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers? "*Your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground,*" God says to Cain. The blood of brothers. Indeed.

Rembrandt's painting captures the spirit though not the letter of the parable. We have already seen how the younger son, finding himself lost to himself in the land of dissimilitude, *the land of unlikeness*, comes to himself and returns to the Father, not as son in his own mind, but as servant, having watched and noted, we must say, that the conditions of the servants in his Father's house were far better than the conditions of indifference and neglect as a swineherd in someone else's service. There is just the hint of a difference between cultures in the way in which servants are regarded.

In principle, it has to be said, the idea of slaves is contrary to the understanding of our humanity for Jews, for Christians and for Muslims. Not that there are not, historically, a multitude of exceptions to the rule, but without this fundamental insight one will not be able to grasp the enormity of the modern form of slavery, slavery as a form of commerce rather than conquest, that involves all the monotheistic religions in a hideous contradiction of their fundamental sense of the human person as being made in the image of God, whether that God is Yahweh, the Trinity or Allah.

The commentary tradition of the Patristic and Medieval periods sees the younger son's journey into a far country as a kind of alienation and forgetfulness of self. Following Augustine (354-430), the far country is "*the land of unlikeness,*" of dissimilitude, "*a strange land*" as Isaac of Stella (c. 1100-c.1169) puts it. He makes the connection to the question that God puts to Adam after the Fall, "*Where art thou?*" As this twelfth century Cistercian preacher puts it, "*Still in the shadows perhaps, so that you cannot see yourself?*" He goes on to make the argument that only by turning inward can you begin to discover your wretchedness and your need for God's illuminating, purifying and perfecting grace.

There are, as it turns out, a multitude of ways to lose ourselves. Augustine's *land of unlikeness* is not a geographical entity so much as a psychological and theological reality. And in that sense, we can begin to see that the elder son who never physically left his Father's home is nonetheless still lost. He separates himself and stands at a remove from his Father's embrace of the wayward younger son. He, too, alienates himself and in some sense his form of separation is darker and deeper. It arises from envy and jealousy, from the forms of pride which are always about wanting more attention to be paid to ourselves. It is invidious, we might say, and it arises from comparisons in which we persuade ourselves that we have been injured, neglected and ignored, on the one hand, and so refuse to rejoice with others, on the other hand.

In the parable, the elder son comes to the party after the event of the reconciliation. In Rembrandt's painting he is presented as the primary observer. He keeps his distance from the emotional impact of the event but it is clear from the parable and from the

painting as commentary on the parable that he is anything but a detached observer. He is subjectively involved, we might say. He is anything but disinterested.

In the parable, the servants first explain to him what has transpired. They do so full of a kind of joy themselves at the return of the younger son. But Luke is very clear about the elder son's reaction. "*He was angry and would not go in.*" He rejects, in other words, the Father's love for his brother. Here is a key point. Just as the Father went out to meet the returning son, so here the Father goes out to beg his elder son, the resentful son, to come in. Always the Father seeks to reconcile and restore. He hears the complaint of the elder son; his complaint is against the younger son, the wastrel, and, by extension, against the mercy of the Father.

The commentary tradition, especially in the monasteries of the medieval world, is quite astute and profoundly observant about this reality. They understand the darker dimensions of the human soul, especially the dangers that arise from self-righteousness and self-esteem. In a way, there is the awareness that works-righteousness, to use a later term from the reformation, is indeed deadly and results in a kind of denial of the greater power and truth of God's grace. The elder son feels hard done by because of the Father's compassion. He resents the good that has been granted to his brother. In the mind of the elder son, the younger son is no longer his brother, but neither is his father his father. In rejecting the one, he rejects the other. He is, unwittingly and yet willingly, *in the land of unlikeness*.

The great Cistercian preacher, Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), in one of his *Meditations On the Song of Songs*, the great love-poem of the Jewish Scriptures, remarks that "*the elder brother who returned from the field is the type of that old earthly-minded race who are taught to labor for an earthly heritage, and worn with care groan with furrowed brow under the heavy yoke of the law, bearing the burden and the heat of the day,*" thereby connecting this parable with the parable of the workers in the vineyard. "*He it is, I say,*" says Bernard, "*who even now stands outside because he has no understanding, and refuses to enter the house of feasting, even when invited by his father; so he still defrauds himself of his share in the music and the dancing, and the fatted calf. Unhappy man, refusing to find out how good and pleasant it is for brothers to live in unity!*" For brothers to live in unity, as Psalm 133 (Ps. 132 in the Vulgate) suggests, means to acknowledge the Father they have in common. One cannot help but notice that Bernard here seems to deny the possibility of the return of the elder son. The parable itself says nothing.

Following upon one of the tropes from the Fathers, Bernard goes on to suggest another level of interpretation. "*This must be said to show the difference between the character of the Church and of the synagogue, so the blindness of the one may be distinguished from the insight of the other, and the blessedness of the one may stand in clear contrast to the unhappy foolishness of the other.*" The contrast between Church and Synagogue was a Medieval

commonplace that reflects the Patristic view of the connections and distinctions between Jews and Christians.

We may feel somewhat uncomfortable with that observation but it is important to recall that the parable itself is set within the context of criticism and division between Jesus and the Scribes and Pharisees. This parable, as we have had occasion to remark, is one of three about being lost and found, about redemption and reconciliation. The whole 15<sup>th</sup> chapter begins precisely with a scene of division and tension. The context is one in which the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying about Jesus that "*this man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.*" In the face of their condemnatory criticism, Jesus tells the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost sons.

We have had occasion to remark on the multi-layered approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures. Dante (1265-1321), the great poet-theologian of the Medieval world, provides a succinct summary of what one might call the standard medieval approach as derived from the Fathers. He is writing to his patron, Can Grande della Scala about his great poetic summa, the *Commedia*, which will later be known as the Divine Comedy, explaining how the work is to be read.

The meaning of this work is not simple ... for we obtain one meaning from the letter of it, and another from that which the letter signifies; and the first is called literal, but the other allegorical or mystical. And to make this matter of treatment clearer, it may be studied in the verse: "When Israel came out of Egypt and the House of Jacob from among the strange people, Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his dominion" [Ps. 114. 1,2]. For if we regard the letter alone, what is set before us is the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt in the days of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption wrought by Christ; if the moral sense, we are shown the conversion of the soul from the grief and wretchedness of sin to the state of grace; if the anagogical, we are shown the departure of the holy soul from the thralldom of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they may all be called in general allegorical, since they differ from the literal and historical.

Dante goes on to explain how this interpretative approach works in relation to his great classic of the spiritual life. As Dante himself acknowledges, there are different names and different ways of understanding the multi-layered approach to the reading of Scripture. For the most part, as we have tried to suggest, this approach stands under the credal principles of the Christian Faith and is measured by those saving truths.

With respect to the elder son, there are a number of intriguing commentaries, but perhaps the most intriguing of all is that of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), the twelfth century Abbess whose sermons or expositions on this Parable have become the focus of

more recent scholarship. Set within the context of the monastic communities of Medieval Europe, the figure of the elder son brings out the kinds of questions about the virtues and the vices that affect all human communities. As Beverley Mayne Kienzle observes about this approach, *"Hildegard's lesson fits into monastic life and the tensions over observance of the Rule and discipline of transgressions. Indeed her observations on human behavior – jealousy, blaming God's [sic] for one's faults, making a new start in life – apply to all human conditions"*. While preserving the literary and dare one say, literal meaning of the parable, Kienzle suggests that *"Hildegard preserves the dramatic structure and tension of the Parable but she enhances it with the introduction of the vices and the virtues, their alliances with the character and the relevance of the drama to monastic life"*.<sup>1</sup>

There is another drama, a more interior drama than the drama of the younger son whose actions are so much more visible and evident. The other drama has to do with those within a community of faith and about whether they truly *"dwell under the shelter of the Most High"* or have separated themselves from its truth and meaning.

Bernard of Clairvaux puts it this way. *"My fear, brothers, is that among us there may be someone who is not dwelling in the shelter of the Most High, but trusting in his strength and in the abundance of his riches. Possibly someone who is zealous and much given to watching, fasting, and labours and other such things, but who thinks that he has long since amassed a whole wealth of merits and, trusting in this, has grown less than careful about the fear of God."* Bernard makes the strong point that *"without Him [namely, God], we cannot hold or preserve what we have received from Him."* He goes on to talk about *"some who have lost hope"*; some because they focus entirely on their own weakness, others whose hope is vain *"because they flatter themselves in the hope of his mercy so much that they neglect to mend their sinful ways"*. As Bernard suggests, *"the first dwells in his merits, the second in his woes, and third in his vices"*.<sup>2</sup> It is a nice summary of the kinds of problems that belong to every community, certainly in every parish! And we can see how the elder son in the parable brings out this kind of dilemma, the dilemma of the soul who stays at least outwardly in his Father's house but fails to recognize in different ways that it is all about grace, the grace of God that keeps us in the Father's love and joy.

Hildegard provides a twofold exegesis of the Parable in a series of addresses or expositions to her monastic community. The first is about *"the drama of the individual soul who falls away from God, slips into vices, but later returns to God"* (Kienzle, Hildegard's Exegesis of the Prodigal Son). The second is about *"the drama of salvation history where humanity sins, is expelled from Paradise, then receives the law, the prophets, and finally the*

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<sup>1</sup> All the references to Hildegard are drawn from Beverley Mayne Kienzle's article, "Hildegard of Bingen's Expositiones evangeliorum and Her Exegesis of the Parable of the Prodigal Son," in "Im Angesicht Gottes suche der Mensch sich selbst". Hildegard von Bingen 1098-1998. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001, pp. 299-324.

<sup>2</sup> *Lenten Sermons on the Psalm 'He Who Dwells'*, Sermon One in Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on Conversion*, Cistercian Fathers Series, No. 25.

*Saviour bringing redemption*" (Kienzle, Hildegard's Exegesis of the Prodigal Son). Both forms of exegesis emphasize the theme of return in terms of repentance, redemption, and rebirth.

The story of the younger son is not just about being lost and found but as the parable itself suggests, it is also about death and resurrection and the joy that belongs to the idea of the fullness of life. What the younger son discovered through his dissolute ways was the exact opposite of the fullness of life. He only comes back to life by returning to God.

With the elder son, on the first form of interpretation, there is a kind of delicacy of expression, a wanting to affirm the rightness of those who remain, in some sense, within the community of the Father's love and yet... and yet. That is the crux of the matter. Hildegard emphasizes the things that are right about the elder son, remaining within the *"mansion of virtues,"* as she puts it, the exact opposite of *"Malice's villa"* where the younger brother had gone. She sees the elder son as astonished at the Father's action, namely, *"that in accepting the younger brother, God made so much good from so much evil"* and then goes on to point out the fault of the elder son. *"The younger son, in his view, did not have the necessary penitence so that there would be joy over his as over one sinner,"* echoing the preceding parables (Kienzle, Hildegard). In short, Hildegard is addressing the delicate business of jealousies and resentments that arise in the community but also affirming the salient point that in one way or another we feel a kind of sympathy for the elder brother. The return, after all, cannot be cheap grace. Something has to be at work in us, indeed a necessary penitence, necessary but entirely dependent on the grace of God's redemption of our humanity.

The parable, of course, has shown what is at work in the mind of the younger son. He came to himself but not by presuming upon his status as son any longer. We have been given to see this but the elder son hasn't, except in Rembrandt's painting which, in making him an observer of the exact moment of the return, brings out the deeper darkness of the human soul in its capacity for resentment and envy.

Hildegard goes on to take some care in explaining the logic of the greater power of good over evil, suggesting that in the return of the prodigal son, everyone benefits because when *"evil knowledge returns to the good, all good things of the Father are praised, and magnified in all creation"* (Kienzle, Hildegard). In a very real sense, there is the greater testimony of the compassionate goodness of God in the overcoming of evil. This is part and parcel of the Lenten journey, part and parcel of the Christian faith and belongs precisely to the point about their being *"joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth"* and *"joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth"* as stated in the two preceding parables.

There is, as well, another ironic remark that is often overlooked, namely, the idea that the joy is greater, *“more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.”* I say ironic because who, after all, can claim to be completely just and in no need of repentance? But Jesus’ remark is pointed directly at his accusers, the Pharisees and the Scribes who murmur and take exception to his *“receiving sinners and eating with them.”* In other words, it is a strong critique of our human presumption to self-righteousness, a check to our judgmentalism of others, too.

Hildegard’s second form of exegesis is more intriguing and somewhat unique. As Beverley Kienzle suggests, she may have got it from Origen (c.184-c.254), but it has to do with a larger treatment of salvation history. The two sons are respectively types; the elder represents the angels, the younger son, humanity. While recognizing the influence of Origen on Patristic and Medieval exegesis, it seems to me there is another influence at work here too, namely the theology of Anselm (c.1033-1109) on the question of human redemption.

Anselm locates the dynamic of human redemption in the larger context of the *justitia dei*, the justice of God. Redemption is about restoring the divine justice of creation; the fallen angels are replaced by humanity restored to the fullness of life which is heaven. In this view of things there is again a sense of the greater goodness of God at work in redemption, a redemption which emphasizes as well the material and corporeal aspects of our humanity and thereby avoids the dangers of the gnostic separation of matter and spirit. In this view of things, redemption happens because repentance is possible, indeed, necessary for us in our taking a hold of the redemptive work of Christ, the Incarnate Son. The angels are spiritual creatures who are understood to have a role as messengers and agents of the divine will. In Hildegard’s exposition, *“God sent Gabriel to announce Christ’s conception to Mary. The angel’s greeting and the Holy Spirit’s coming over Mary corresponds to the father of the parable’s greeting and embrace of his son. The father’s kiss of the son represents the birth of Jesus, the high point or climax of the drama”* (Kienzle, Hildegard). Once again, one can see the creedal principles at work in the exegesis.

But what about the elder son in this interpretation? The angels are spiritual creatures, to be sure, and therefore belong to the spiritual fellowship of the Church. But the angels have no need of repentance; their fall or their adherence is absolute and eternal. They are sempiternal, outside time. What Hildegard alludes to is the theme of the jealous angels but without falling into the gnostic trap of thinking that the material world is evil and nothing worth. They question, too, all the fuss and bother that is being made by the Father over the return of the younger son. Such are the fallen angels whom Christ casts out.

Hildegard’s exegesis seeks to uphold the necessity of repentance at the same time as highlighting the unity of the spiritual community and the respective and complementary roles that angels and men have together as dwellers both in the same

house of God, the one above, the other below stairs, to use a seventeenth century analogy. The angels have a critical role with respect to the *justitia dei*, to the justice of the whole of creation redeemed. The angels play a major part in the unfolding of redemption as liturgically expressed in the logic of the Christian year going from Incarnation to Passion and Resurrection and then to Pentecost. The good angels are defined by what they cling to and adore; namely the superlative goodness of God. This, too, is the whole purpose and meaning of our spiritual lives in community.

In the parable, we are not given to see the return of the elder son. We are only made aware of the Father's love who goes out to him even as he ran out to embrace the younger son. The Father's words convict us of the Father's love. They challenge us to remain in that love by rejoicing in the return of the younger son. *"It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; was lost, and is found."* It was fitting. That idea of the congruence of things is a large part of the theological mindset of the eleventh and twelfth centuries and belongs to this symbolical and creedal way of reading the Scriptures. It helps us, I hope, to appreciate the Father's love and to remind us that we abide in his love. It encourages us, too, perhaps to hope for the return of the elder son, to his being reconciled both to his Father and his brother.

The possibility of return requires our watching and looking upon that love, like Cuthbert, missionary and the Bishop of Lindisfarne (c. 634-687), whom we commemorate this evening. He is one of the most attractive of the early English saints. A figure of the seventh century, he, too, like Bernard and Hildegard after him, was no stranger to the spiritual vices that infect and destroy spiritual communities. To be recalled to the goodness of God as something which we have to seek and want constantly and to be reminded of the spiritual necessity of repentance is the task of the Church in her proclamation of the Gospel through Word and Sacrament. It is about our *"dwell[ing] in the shelter of the Most High"*. But, only if we are watching, rather than judging; only if we recognize that *"without [God], we cannot hold or preserve what we have received from Him (Bernard)"*. Ultimately, we pray for the return of the elder son and so for ourselves.

*"Blessed are those servants, whom their lord when he cometh shall find watching."*

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Commemoration of St. Cuthbert  
The Prodigal Son III  
March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012  
Christ Church*