

The Hospitality of God

Luke 15:11-32

May 10, 2020

1. A Study of Divine Hospitality as Seen in the Story of the Prodigal Son

- a. I want to recount this familiar story, and then offer some insights I received from my former teacher and friend Henri Nouwen. In his book, The Return of the Prodigal Son, Henri offers an interpretation that unpacks the meaning of this ancient story in a marvelous way with a precise application to the issue of Christian hospitality. Also, there are some important lessons for us as we confront the coronavirus pandemic: accept the love of God, celebrate the love of God, and become like the father in sharing love with others.
- b. 1st century Jewish literature was filled with several stories about two sons and almost all of them began the same way as the story in Luke: "A certain man had 2 sons." These stories all had a similar plot: the younger son was a scoundrel and a rotten kid who comes off well at the end of the story, while the older brother was a thickheaded dolt, a loveless character. It's the Jacob and Esau story from the Old Testament all over again.
- c. The story begins as the younger son comes in a very brazen fashion to demand his inheritance now, as if to say to his father, "I wish you were dead." Then he goes and wastes his wealth and life -- how low can you get, a Jewish boy slopping the hogs? Starving to death and out of money he makes the decision to return home. Knowing his father has no reason to welcome him home, he carefully practices his speech: "I have sinned against heaven and against you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son, take me back as your slave, but just feed me." One commentator referred to this as a soup kitchen conversion.
- d. When the younger brother returns the response of the older brother is not one of hospitality and celebration, but anger. He complains to his father, I've stayed here by your side all this time and you never had a party for me. You're giving him your prized possessions – that's my inheritance you're giving away. The older brother is so mad he won't even say "my brother," instead it refers to him as "that son of yours."
- e. In describing the 2 brothers this story as told by Jesus is identical to all the other 2 son stories of 1st century Palestine. The difference comes only when Jesus begins to speak about the father. The father in that patriarchal culture was to be honored,

respected, and revered. The younger son should come in fear, pleading and begging for forgiveness just as he practiced. The father should respond with harsh words of judgment. But that is not how Jesus tells the story.

- f. The father runs to meet the younger son, taking the initiative to greet him. The boy starts to deliver his words of confession, pleading for forgiveness, but the father cuts him short. Without even letting him finish the words of contrition the father wraps him in his arms and calls for him to receive a robe to cover his wounds, sandals not only to soothe his feet but to send a clear signal – this boy is no one’s slave. Then he gives the boy his signet ring as if to say, you have authority to act on my behalf. Then the father announces a big party. We will splurge and really celebrate, for my boy has come home.
 - g. In this description of the father you can see the change in the how Jesus tells the story, but the real transformation can be seen when the older brother complains about throwing a party. What does the father say? Does he rebuke him and say, "Shut up, you ungrateful child, I'm the one in charge here." No he turns to the oldest son and says: Everything else I have is now yours." Did you hear that? "All that is mine is now yours." The 2/3 of the estate left after the prodigal son wasted his 1/3, now is given to the older brother.
 - h. Look what the father has done in this story: gave away 1/3 of his estate to the younger son; gave away the remainder of his wealth to the older son; gave away his prized possessions: a ring, a robe, and shoes – even the fatted calf. At the end of the story the father has nothing. No robe, no ring, no shoes, no calf -- no estate at all. He's given it all away. And nobody was given time to finish their words of repentance, yet everybody is forgiven. It is the story of a father who gave up everything in order to love without limit.
2. Henri Nouwen interprets the story of Luke in keeping with Rembrandt's painting, Return of the Prodigal Son, now hanging in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. (You can Google “Return of the Prodigal Son painting” to view this masterpiece.)
 - a. Particularly in his later paintings Rembrandt has a fascination with blind people. He paints blind persons as the ones who really see, like several portraits of the near blind Simeon, the old priest who holds baby Jesus in his arms and proclaims that now he has seen the salvation of the Lord.
 - b. Rembrandt changes the story as told by Luke. Unlike earlier pictures that Rembrandt had painted with the father running to greet the prodigal son, now in

his old age, Rembrandt paints the father as one who recognizes his son with the inner eyes of his heart. The father is painted as blind and weak. The only authority the father claims for himself is the authority of compassion. Nouwen writes, "Here is a God I want to believe in; a father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting."

- c. The true center of Rembrandt's painting is to be seen in the hands of the father. It's in the hands, not the face of the father, where the soul of the painting is reflected. The focus of the picture forces you to look closely at the hands and you realize the two hands are dramatically different. They are the hands of a father and a mother. The left hand is strong and muscular while the right hand is refined, soft, and very tender. It is a mother's hand. The one who welcomes home is both mother and father. The father's big red cape is like the sheltering wings of a mother bird.
 - d. The pathos and compassion displayed in the painting are enough to bring one to tears. In fact, that was exactly my sister's response when she viewed it in person a few years ago. She just stood there and wept. That painting can teach us a great deal about Christian hospitality.
3. There are at least 3 Lessons To Be Learned Concerning the Practice of Hospitality
- a. 1st, receive the hospitality of God. In our evangelical circles of faith, this is the usual application of the story of the prodigal son. God's hospitality is offered to us all and we are welcomed home. As the anthem (My Shepherd Will Supply My Need) proclaims: "There will I find a settled rest while others go and come. No more a stranger, nor a guest; but like a child at home." Many find it difficult to receive and say yes to the hospitality of God. Henri Nouwen asked the question that was crucial personally for him as he dealt with his own demons of depression, "Can I accept that I am worth looking for? Do I believe that there is a real desire in God simply to be with me? Here lies the core of my spiritual struggle: the struggle against self-rejection, self-contempt, and self-loathing." For many, low self-esteem is seen as some type of virtue. But the real sin here is to deny God's love for me, that I am a person that is truly the focus of God's special care. Underneath much of our human assertiveness, competitiveness, and rivalry there is a very insecure heart that is much less sure of itself than our outward behavior would lead us to believe. You are loved. As Carlyle Marney summed up the gospel once in four words: "God is for you." Receive the hospitality of God. As we are now sequestered in our homes, that is an important message for us.

- b. 2nd, celebrate the hospitality of God. The call to celebrate divine hospitality is at the center of Christ's description of the kingdom. The other parables of Luke 15, the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, make this same point: kingdom people are called to celebrate hospitality. In the story of the lost coin the party that is planned when the coin is found cost dramatically more than the coin itself was worth. The hospitality of God is worth an extravagant celebration. In the story of the prodigal son the father's words are important. "Quickly" he said, bring the gifts and get ready to party. Henri writes, "If that is God's way, then I am challenged to let go of all of the voices of doom and damnation that drag me into depression and allow the small joys to reveal the truth about the world I live in." There is certainly no claim here that sorrow disappears for the person of faith, but rather that joy can be ours even in the midst of suffering. People who come to enjoy the hospitality of God do not deny the darkness, but they choose to live in the light. Joy is the mark of the people of God. Celebrate the hospitality of God. Especially now during this pandemic, wouldn't it be nice to celebrate something?
- c. For me the 3rd lesson of the parable is the most surprising of all in terms of its focus on hospitality. The parable beckons us not only, like the prodigal son, to come home, but also asks us to take one more very important and necessary step. With our evangelical heritage we often look at the parable of the prodigal son as simply a story calling us to come home and experience the saving hospitality of God. So in our tradition we hear the parable as an invitation to: "Come home, come home, you who art weary come, home." Too often we see the homecoming as the final step of faith. But Nouwen points out that the story of the prodigal son urges us to go further and take one additional step. The most radical statement Jesus ever made were his words, "Be compassionate as your father is compassionate." As we hear this story, the call of Christ is not just to come home like the prodigal son, and not just to celebrate the hospitality of God, but to accept the high challenge of Christ to become like the father. That is our highest calling, to accept our role of becoming the father: The hands that forgive, console, heal, and prepare a feast of celebration must become my own. That, says Henry Nouwen, is the highest stage of our spiritual life. "My final vocation is indeed to be, like the father."
- d. The real question of this parable is not just are you ready to come home and enjoy the father's hospitality but are you interested in being like the father? "I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home, but the one who welcomes home; not just the one who receives compassion, but the one who offers it is well." Becoming like the heavenly father is the very heart of the message of Jesus. The call to

conversion is a great call to move from belonging to the world to belonging to God. That means we come not only to enjoy the hospitality of God and to celebrate that hospitality, but more than that, we are ready to offer divine hospitality to all in the world around us.

4. Conclusion.

- a. Have you ever met a person that was able to live like that, I mean really live like that? For me, Henri Nouwen came close to that type of person. I got to know him in 1972 and 73 as my teacher at Yale Divinity School. Henri was already very well known as the author of many popular books, such as The Wounded Healer. The contacts he had and the persons he would invite to class were an amazing Who's Who of religious leadership in America. He was the most popular teacher on-campus and had to dramatically limit the size of his classes. But with all this fame and popularity, he would take off every 3rd semester to go and live among an Indian tribe in Peru. Then at the height of his fame and popularity he resigned his prestigious teaching position to go and live in the L'Arche community in Montréal where he committed himself to the care of severely disabled persons. How do you do that? How do you walk away from a life of dramatic influence and importance? I asked that question to Henri and his response came very quickly: "When you do not own yourself, you have nothing to lose. When you have nothing to lose, you can be amazingly free."
- b. That's the call to hospitality: to be so like the father that we are willing to give it all away. Come and enjoy, then celebrate the hospitality of the father. More importantly, come and practice the father's hospitality, for there is a whole world longing to be loved.

5. Questions for Our Reflection

- a. Like me, are there times when you find it difficult to accept the fact that you are God's beloved? Can we really believe that we are the focus God's love and special care?
- b. What are some ways we can celebrate God's love? During this pandemic, how can we put the demons of despair and anxiety behind us and celebrate the hope of faith and the love of God?
- c. What are some things we can do to express the hospitality of God?