

## **Chiaroscuro (Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*)**

**Luke 15:11-32**

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In my former life as a youth minister, one year I ended up on the planning team for a CBF-NC ski trip. The theme we chose for the retreat was “forgiveness,” and one of my jobs was to help shape a session that would help the students ponder the theme of forgiveness. I ended up getting a poster of the painting that is included in your bulletins today, Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, and using it as part of the weekend.

Rembrandt's painting felt like the right image for many reasons but especially because it's just so accessible. You don't have to know a ton about artistic technique or Rembrandt's life or the materials he used to appreciate this painting. It is striking for people of all backgrounds, ages, and experiences.

When I come to this painting, the first thing that captivates me is the balance between light and shadow. People who know more about art than I do tell me that this is a common feature of Rembrandt's work, that he frequently painted with the technique known as *chiaroscuro* contrasting the dark and the light. It is a particularly fitting technique for this story, the story of the Prodigal Son, with characters who are also vacillating between light and dark, between righteousness and brokenness.

This is perhaps Jesus' best-known parable, a story about a child who spits on everything given to him by his father, ends up living in squalor, and eventually returns home and begs for mercy. The father, being a compassionate and loving man, accepts the son with open arms, joyfully receiving him back into his household. When we tell this story to children, this is where it ends, lacking only “and they all lived happily ever after” to be a fitting fairy tale.

In the scripture, of course, this is not where it ends. Instead, there is an angry older brother who resents his impudent and wasteful brother, one who refuses to celebrate the homecoming and who lashes out at his dad for showing the brother such kindness. The father, again devoted and benevolent, gently tells the older brother that he too is loved and that he should be excited about the return...but the story ends there, and we never really get to know whether or not the older brother comes around.

It is often this way with the stories of our Bible. They are often not as neat as we want them to be, containing both brightness and shadow, light and dark.

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Rembrandt's painting—and you can all look at it instead of looking at me; it's much more interesting and beautiful than I am—Rembrandt's painting captures the moment right when the prodigal son returns and is accepted lovingly by the father. The two of them make up one group of the scene, set in the foreground and bathed in a warm light. The light allows us to see the son for all that he is and isn't—it allows us to contrast his tattered clothes with the rich robes of the others.

It especially allows us to focus on his bare foot. The first time I remember looking at this painting, it was the foot that jumped out at me. The others are dressed in fine cloths and bright colors, adorned in jewels and ornaments...and this younger, bedraggled son is down to his last shoe. If you look closely,<sup>1</sup> you can see the shoe, just barely, next to the foot, but it's lacking a heel and has come off. The other foot—the right foot—is about to lose its shoe as well. The son is not only hungry, homeless, and in rags for clothes...he barely has anything to cover his feet.

Rembrandt, no doubt, was captivated by verse 22, where the father exclaims in joy, "Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet." Somehow I always missed that line—the fatted calf struck me, but the fact that the younger son was trekking barefoot through pig sties eluded me until Rembrandt accentuated it. I have encountered a lot of hungry and homeless people—some on the side of the road, some in shelters, some in hovels—but most of them at least had shoes. The bare foot is a stark and wonderful image to convey just how broken this son is.

And yet, despite being broken, he is in the light. His face is exhausted but relieved, weathered but now safe. He nestles into his father's arms and collapses in a whirlwind of emotions.

He is redeemed. If Rembrandt had chosen to paint a different part of this story, this boy would have been painted in the shadows, but this is the son who has returned, who has acknowledged his shortcomings and is now back in the light.

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The fascinating thing about this painting, however, is not that the prodigal son is in the light. We expect that—we know the story, know that he repents and comes home to open arms. This grouping of Rembrandt's painting is the fairy tale that we learn as children when we first encounter the word "prodigal." The fascinating thing about this painting is that this grouping is not the only one in the light.

There is another character, to the right, separated from the father and son by shadows and blurred faces, whose face is also aglow. We don't know who this character is—he could be an advisor or an attendant—but given the fact that there are only three people in this story in the scripture, I'd argue that this third man is the older brother.

Based on the scripture itself, the older brother shouldn't really be in the light. He's angry and jealous, resentful and bitter. But the man in this picture is none of these things. His hands are gripping each other not tightly in frustration but gently, steadily, soundly. His eyes are soft and accepting. And his face is as bright as the prodigal son and his father.

If this man is the older brother, then this scene is not a scene from the scripture but rather a moment that comes just after the parable ends. This is an image from Rembrandt's own interpretation and imagination. It is the fairy tale ending that we all hope for in our scripture but do not always get.

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Theologian Henri Nouwen loved this painting. He stared at it in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg for hours, contemplating each nuance, each brushstroke, each detail as deeply as he could. He

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<sup>1</sup> That is, if you're looking at this on a computer and can zoom in 250%.

then wrote a book called *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* that relied heavily on the painting. In that book, he wrote that Rembrandt identified with both the younger and the older son, that he had felt the pain of being lost and alone and the pain of bitter jealousy. According to Nouwen, Rembrandt knew that both sons needed their father's love, to be healed and forgiven, and to come home. Rembrandt needed for both of these sons to step into the light, because he had traveled in both darknesses and needed assurance of the existence of both atonements.

This is a painting about the redemption of all.

In the end, it does not matter if we raucously and callously turn away from a Creator's love or if we quietly stew in jealousy. Honestly, there are a number of other pitfalls that have the potential to wreak havoc on our lives, our relationships, and our ability to love. All are shadows that separate us from the light, from the ultimate good. It does not matter which ones are more personal to us.

What matters is that we all have the option of returning to the light—to gentle, gracious, loving, open arms, to one who is excited about our homecoming. The moral that God loves all *is* part of the Prodigal Son story. And even if that story ends before we're ready, the idea that all are redeemed through a compassionate Creator is part of the rest of our scripture...so it is easy to see how Rembrandt arrived at this conclusion. Beyond the narrative alone, his painting speaks the truth of our scripture.