



SERMON PREACHED BY THE PRESIDENT, COMPASS ROSE SOCIETY  
AT ST. MARY'S, BONITA SPRINGS, FLORIDA, UNITED STATES  
Sunday, 10 March 2013

Joshua 5:9-12

II Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

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In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The One God. Amen.

At the outset, let me express my deep appreciation to your Rector, Fr. Michael Rowe, for his invitation to me to come to preach here this morning at St. Mary's, Bonita Springs. I welcomed the opportunity to accept your Rector's invitation so I could personally thank you for joining and being a part of the Anglican Communion Compass Rose Society. As you know, the mission of the Compass Rose Society is to support the global ministry of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Secretary General of the Anglican Communion; but in supporting these ministries, we are given the great opportunity to live fully into our global communion to which we belong. Imagine being a part of a global faith family that is in 164 countries around the world — in countries so diverse as Papua New Guinea, Tanzania, Palestine, Iran, Argentina and China; as well as England, Canada, Cuba and Brazil. This is our Anglican Communion and St. Mary's, Bonita Springs, is an integral part of Jesus' family in this place and around the world.

What generous hospitality I have received since arriving in Bonita Springs yesterday morning. Compass Rose Society Past-President, Bishop Philip Poole told me when I was elected President of the Society last October, that if I were to receive an invitation to St. Mary's Church, accept it immediately because of the great time he had here with you last year! I took Philip's advice seriously and I am so happy that I can be here with you today. I also want to thank Compass Rose Society members, Elinor and Bob Foltz for all the arrangements they have made for my visit. The Foltz' have been good friends for 13 years. Bob is on the International Board of the Society and he serves with distinction on several committees of the Board; while Elinor serves on the Communications Committee for the Society. It is wonderful to be here in Bonita Springs today and I am looking forward to meeting you after this service.

Several years ago, when my wife Kirsten and I lived in London, we took what travel agencies in London called, "a weekend escape". The long weekend trip that we took was to Russia, to St. Petersburg. Of course, when anyone visits the great city of St. Petersburg, one place that is a must to visit is their great museum, the Hermitage. While we were at the Hermitage, we experienced the Tsars' enormous wealth in their Winter Palace as well as a few of the three million pieces of art and artefacts that are a part of the Museum's collection. For those of you who have been to the Hermitage, you know what a great smorgasbord it contains.

To be honest with you, I am a person who has "museum feet". After a couple of hours in any museum, I have absorbed all that I can absorb and I had "museum feet" when we entered the galleries of the Hermitage's baroque paintings. But then, all of a sudden, we walked into a relatively small room and in front of me was Rembrandt's, *The Prodigal Son*. At first, I was amazed how large the painting is, but then, I became totally captivated by the painting as I looked at it. I could not move. The embrace of the father and son has become seared in my mind as I reflected on the gospel for today which involves rejection, reconciliation, forgiveness, and inner healing.

The most incredible part of the painting for me are the father's hands that Rembrandt painted. In Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Nouwen makes the most incredible observation about the Father, "the Patriarch" in the parable today. The left hand in the painting is different from the right hand. The left hand is "strong and muscular" while the right hand is "refined, soft and very tender". The left hand has "a firm grip" on the younger son while the right hand does not "hold or grasp". The fingers on the right hand have an "elegant quality". The right hand "wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort". Then Nouwen says of the right hand: "It is a mother's hand". It is in his *Prodigal Son* that Rembrandt introduces us to the maleness and femaleness of God. God is a father as well as a mother. God is a mother as well as a father. In other words, the Father is not only a great patriarch. "He touches the son with a masculine hand as well as a feminine hand. He holds and she caresses. He comforts and she consoles. He is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present."

When Nouwen first published his book in the early 90's, he helped me to understand the nature of God, particularly how that secret is shared with us in the Gospel for today.

The Prodigal Son Gospel is one of the most well-known parables in the Gospels. It is a story about a father, the patriarch of the family, and his two sons. But the parable must also be seen in its Middle Eastern context. So often, we give no thought to verse 12 when Jesus tells us that the younger son asks his father, "Father, give me a share of the property that will belong to me". Instead of any debate like we would expect, Luke simply records, "So he divided his property between them". So the father divided his property between his two sons. What is happening here according to Lucan scholar, Kenneth Bailey, is an unheard-of-event. Instead of being a matter-of-fact happening, as Luke records, such an event simply does not happen in Middle Eastern culture. What the Prodigal Son asks is hurtful, offensive, and in radical contradiction to the most revered tradition of the time. Bailey argues that the son's manner of leaving "is tantamount to wishing his father dead".

When one understands the cultural context out of which the *Prodigal Son* is written, the Father's response when he returns is even more dramatic. The younger son, by asking for his inheritance is nothing less than offensive. It is a rejection "of the home in which the son was born and nurtured and a break with the most precious tradition carefully upheld by the larger community of which he was a part." So when the Prodigal Son left for a distant country, it was not like our sons or daughters going on a gap year or to see the world; instead, the Prodigal Son was totally cutting himself off from his family, he was disregarding all the values of his family and community – the most important ingredients in Middle Eastern culture.

When I was a junior in college, I did my junior year abroad in Beirut, Lebanon studying and living at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut and also studying at the American University of Beirut. I lived in a large dorm at the NEST that had four beds. When classes began in September, there were only three of us in the room; but during the winter, our fourth colleague arrived. His name was Ali and he was from Iraq. Ali had converted to Christianity in his Iraqi village and when he left his Muslim tradition, his father told him that he had to leave his village and if he ever returned, he would be killed. Normally, in Middle Eastern culture, if a son did what Ali did, or what the Prodigal Son did, they would be killed. There would be no questions asked. I always think of Ali when I read the story of the Prodigal Son because both fathers did not do what Middle Eastern culture dictated.

We fast-forward to the Prodigal Son's return. Going totally against the culture of the day, the father ran to meet his son so that other villagers would not harm or reject him. Before the son can offer his confession, asking for forgiveness, the father "put his arms around him and kissed him". Then the father presents his son three things: 1) sandals signifying that the father accepts him as a son, not as a

hired servant as the Prodigal Son planned (it should be noted only free men have sandals – not slaves, bond servants or free laborers); 2) a robe indicating how special his son is to him; and 3) a ring which empowers the son to transact business within the village. In the Hebrew scriptures, this is a Hebrew word (kezazah) that means rejection or shunning that is used when a Jew loses his money to a foreigner. Although the younger son had lost all of his money to foreigners, the father wanted to make sure that his son would not be rejected or shunned; hence this radical outpouring of the father's love as the father embraces and holds his son.

As Kenneth Bailey argues, "the father chooses to suffer himself rather than cause ... pain to others". Throughout this parable, Jesus' life is reflected; the nature of God is reflected. This Lent, we reflect on Jesus' costly demonstration of unexpected love that has the power to change our hearts, to change our minds. When we are transformed, we will be able to appreciate God's love more fully and how much God sincerely desires reconciliation.

We return to the hands of the Prodigal Son's Father in Rembrandt's painting. This Lent, how are our hands? What do your hands say about you? What do my hands say about me? Are our hands open enough to hold and protect and, at the same time "to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort"? How willing are we to be vulnerable to live a Christ-like life, knowing full well, the cost of discipleship on Good Friday as Jesus carried his cross through the city streets of Jerusalem to Calvary/Golgotha as a despised and rejected prisoner? Are our hands open enough to show the compassionate love that Jesus has for all of God's people?

How open are my hands?

In the name of God. Amen.

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