

Being Found

(Luke 13:11-32 – Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on March 27th, 2022)

The lost son, the prodigal, the wasteful son. We all know this story, and dare I say it we have probably known someone like this son. Preceding it are other stories about loss, a lost sheep and a lost coin. They all follow the same theme. Just before Jesus tells these stories, the religious authorities are grumbling about who Jesus spends time with namely the ‘tax collector’s and sinners’.

Let me summarise the story, – the younger upstart of a son demands his share of inheritance, is given it, takes off to explore the known world and ends up after wasting it all on the high life penniless and hungry. Tail between his legs he returns home to find his father running out to greet him and restore him with a cloak, a ring and a party. The older brother has stayed home, worked the farm, done the right thing and now stands watching what he thinks is favouritism and can’t bring himself to join the celebration. It is really all about the Father, a father who gives away his wealth to a younger son (all of which was unheard of back then), sets him free and when he returns penniless he is overjoyed that he has returned home.

This morning I would like us to look at this story through the lens of a famous painting by Rembrandt. It is called Return of the Prodigal Son. In a moment the image will be on the screen or you can look at the laminated copy you have been given. Henri Nouwen spent months looking at this painting to help him understand the story and then he wrote a book about it.

So let us look at the painting

1. Entire picture



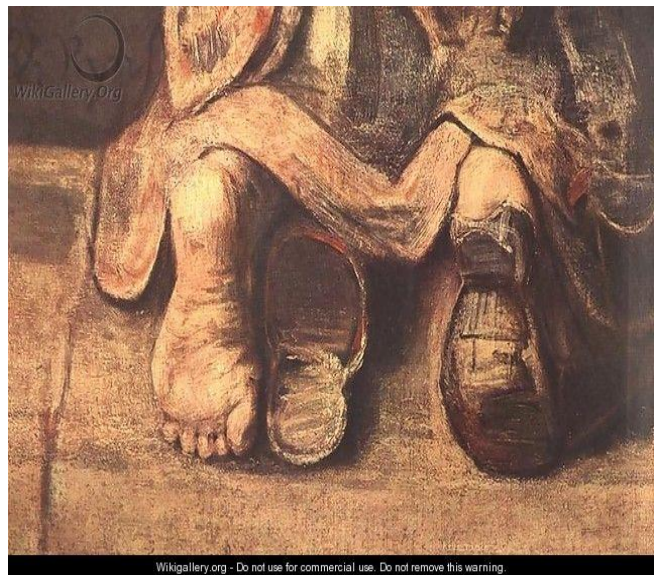
- What do you notice first, which part of the picture are you drawn to?
 - the son

- the father
- Keep looking, what else do you notice?
 - the light and darkness
 - the tall upright figure standing on the right
 - the small seated man
 - the person in the shadows standing quite close to the father
 - the person really in the shadows you can barely see in the top left corner

2. The Son



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Let's look more closely at the son.

He's on his knees

Shabbily dressed, looking wretched like an outcast

Emaciated

Shaved head, like a prisoner

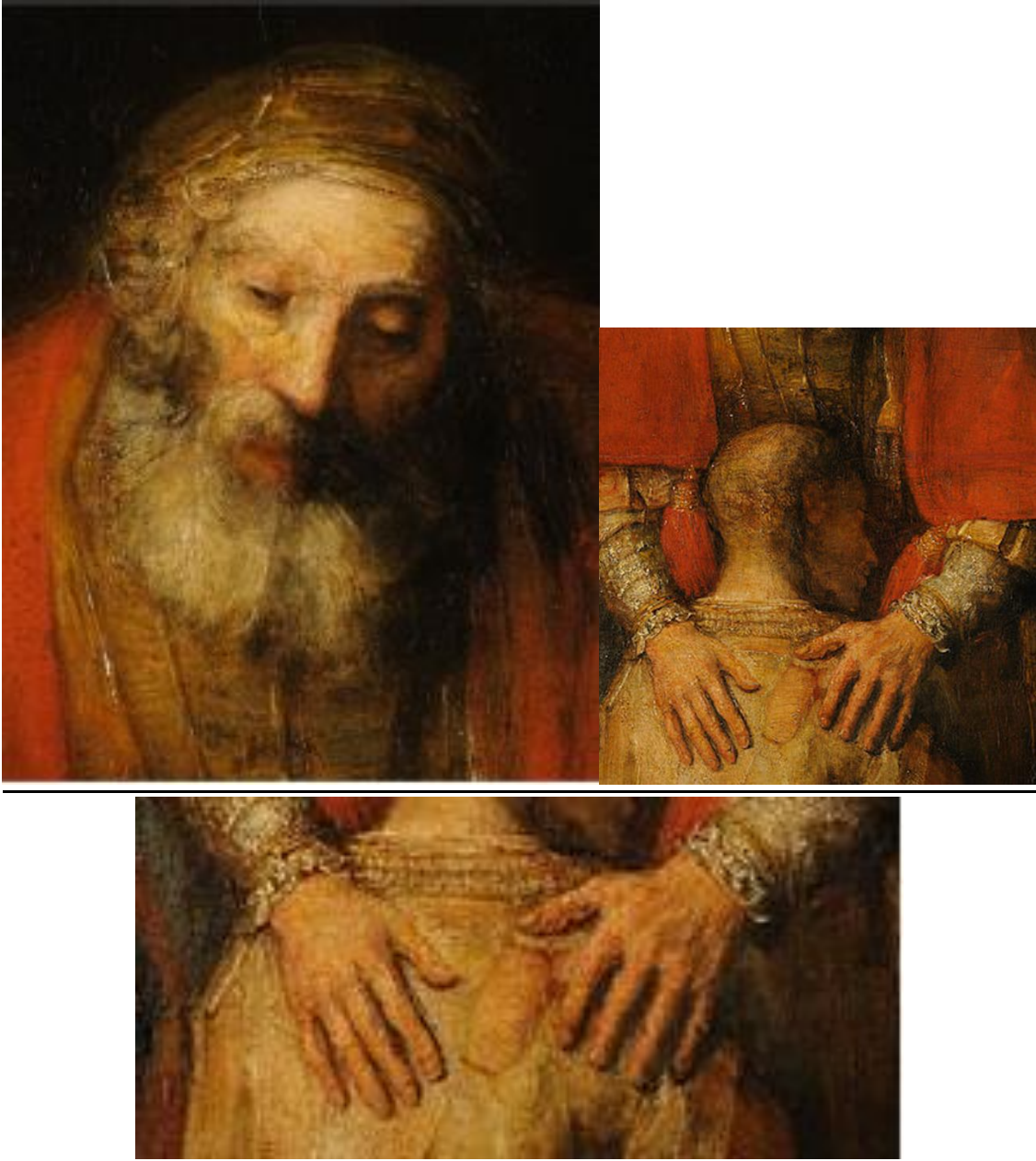
His feet – one shoe wrecked, the other lost – signs of a long and hard journey

Leaning in and resting on his father's breast, heart

Oblivious to everyone else standing around

What feeling arise for you as you look at the son?

3. The Father



Let's look at the Father

An old man

Stooping down to embrace his son

Signs of wealth with his rich red cloak, lace edging on the hem of the sleeves

His face – old, almost blind, tired, full of compassion and mercy, looking only at his son

A welcoming pose as his cloak almost envelops this son, there is a sense in which it is hard to tell where the two figures (father and son) begin and end

His hands – both old and stiff looking, both on the back of the son but each quite different.

One hand is strong and muscular, with a strong grip he is holding his son

The other hand – softer, tender consoling and comforting

What feelings arise for you as you look at the Father?

4. The Brother/Elder Son



Dressed like his father, wearing a rich red cloak
Standing tall, looking on, stern, hesitating
Is he suspicious, or disapproving or jealous or resentful?
He is wringing his hands, why?
Can't step into the scene, what is holding him back?
Is he just as lost as his brother?

What feelings arise for you as you look at the brother?

5. The onlookers or characters in the shadows



There are three onlookers and I wonder what they are thinking as they observe the scene

a) closest and clearest is a seated man

Perhaps a symbol of the despised tax collectors

Has a distant and vacant stare

Is he beating his breast, does he know his need for forgiveness?

b) a little further away is a person standing

Slightly more in the shadows

Looking past the scene

Curious?

Standing closest to the Father

c) almost unseen in the top left corner another face

Why so far away?

How interested are they in the scene?

Are they too overwhelmed or emotional to be involved?

What feelings arise for you as you look into the shadows?

6. The entire picture again



Let's return to the whole picture again.

Do you see things differently now?

Who in the picture do you most identify with, to which character are you drawn?

This painting like the story itself invites us in, invites us to see ourself in the story.

The lightest part of the picture is the loving welcome of the father and the centre of that part of the picture is his hands that both hold and console.

here is a sense in which both sons are lost.

Wherever we find ourselves in the picture or story we are called to become like the father. We are called to not only be forgiven but to forgive, to not only be welcomed but also to welcome, to not only receive compassion but to offer such compassion to others.

This story, it is often said is about a wanton and wasteful son, however the most wasteful person in the story is the father – he wastes his wealth on the son without asking for it back, he wastes love on both his sons who in their own ways are selfish.

The father chases both his sons – one he runs out to meet as he returns home, the other he leaves a party for to ask him to understand and join the party. Both sons need to allow the father to be who the father is. We need to allow God to be who God is – holding us up, consoling us, enveloping us in his cloak of love and celebrating us.

May be all learn to be as generous and wasteful with our love as the Father is in this story. Amen.