

CODA: PRAYING THE LORD'S PRAYER WITH REMBRANDT

Judges

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When I moved into a house by myself after living in community for several years, one of the first things I did was order a framed print of Rembrandt van Rijn's *Return of the Prodigal Son*, the Dutch painter's memorialization of Jesus' parable of the runaway child and the forgiving father (Luke 15:11-32). I had read Henri Nouwen's pastoral meditation on Jesus' story and the painting, and it had moved me deeply. I wanted to use the painting much as Nouwen had as a daily reminder that I, a lost son, was beloved by a compassionate Father.

For a while the print hung over the fireplace in my living room. But then I moved again, and I decided to place it in a more private part of the house, on the wall space just above the kneeler that I often use to pray. Now, whenever I bend my knees and rest my elbows on the wooden shelf, my eyes are almost level with the back of the son. I can look up slightly to focus on the Father's hands on the son's shoulders, and I can look into the Father's face.

Nouwen describes Rembrandt's memorable image so well:

I saw a man in a great red cloak tenderly touching the shoulders of a disheveled boy kneeling before him. I could not take my eyes away. I felt drawn by the intimacy between the two figures, the warm red of the man's cloak, the golden yellow of the boy's tunic, and the mysterious light engulfing them both. But, most of all, it was the hands—the old man's hands—as they touched the boy's shoulders that reached me in a place where I had never been reached before.

It's taken a couple of years for me to realize how much looking at this print hanging over my kneeler has affected the way I pray, too. In particular, I think, it's changed the way I pray the Lord's Prayer. Now, whenever I recite it, as often as not I'm looking at Rembrandt's image while I do. Each line has taken on new resonance.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. To pray for the reverencing and uplifting of the Father's name is to pray that *this* welcoming, forgiving Father—the Father whose hands gently rest on His lost son's shoulders—be more widely known, seen for the compassionate Father that He is, and worshiped as the Giver of extravagant mercy. To pray for *this* Father's name to be hallowed is to pray that more lost sons and daughters find themselves kneeling under that gracious gaze.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. To pray for *this* Father's kingdom to come and *this* Father's will to be done is to pray for a reign of mercy, kindness, humility, and prodigal divine generosity. It is to pray that debts would be remitted, rebellion ended with homecoming, and banquets held for the dissolute and the self-righteous alike. It is to pray not for the iron-fisted rule of a tyrant but for the self-giving reign of a Father who loves.

Give us this day our daily bread. To pray for regular sustenance from *this* Father is to pray to One who was ready to serve the best meat to a son who had already burned through half the family inheritance. To pray to *this* Father for daily bread is to receive not only the staples of life but also a filet mignon, not only water but



also the best vintage. It is to receive abundance, lavishness and generosity "immeasurably more than all we can ask or conceive" (Eph 3:20 NEB).

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. To pray for forgiveness from *this* Father is to pray to One who leaps up and sprints toward us—throwing dignity to the wind—to offer us forgiveness before we have even been able to blubber our request for it. To pray for *this* Father's forgiveness is to barely get the words out before realizing we have been clothed with the finest garments the house has to offer. To pray for our trespasses to be forgiven is to feel already *this* Father's warm tears as they drip down on our scabbed head.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. To ask *this* Father to "deliver us from evil" is to pray to the One whose hands and cloak provide shelter for us. Nouwen again: "With its warm color and its arch-like shape, [the Fathers cloak] offers a welcome place where it is good to be. ... But as I went on gazing at the red cloak, another image, stronger than that of a tent, came to me: the sheltering wings of the mother bird." To pray to *this* Father for protection is to pray to One whose character Jesus embodied when He wept, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem!... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matt 23:37).

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen. To praise the kingship, the dominion, and the splendor of *this* Father is to praise the kingship of humility, the noncoercive dominion of nurturing love, and the radiant slender of stooping and touching and embracing. To praise *this* Father for ever and ever" is to acknowledge that such "for self-giving divine love is the fount of creation and redemption in eternity past and will be the theme of the lost son's songs into eternity future.

To pray the Our Father with Rembrandt and Jesus' Father in view is to find yourself praying it in a way you hope never to stop.

