Rembrandt and Psychology: Reflections on The Return of the Prodigal Son

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Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Dutch baroque artist, painted The Return of the Prodigal Son shortly before his death in 1669. It now hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. The subject comes from the Gospel According to Luke, Chapter 15. Gaze upon this painting and you will appreciate a sense of great tragedy. The contrast between the light and the dark, the two mysterious figures that appear dimly in the background, the woman behind the father, the stoic appearance of the old man who stands on the side, and the dishevelment of the younger brother, all contribute to this sense of tragedy. One author has said that Rembrandt has elevated tragedy to a symbol of universal significance in this painting. I couldn't agree more. This image represents the epitome of Rembrandt’s psychological mastery.

Look at the father, his back stooped by the years and his hands stiffened by old age. His eyes are closed, but an almost overwhelming sense of kindness is apparent. Here is a man who shows mercy and love and compassion to a son who acted as though he had wished him dead. Asking for an early inheritance is equivalent to just that! The prodigal son leaves home with money; he returns home in tatters. One sandal lies beside his foot, while the other barely hangs on by a strap. His head is shaved like that of a slave, and he looks to the side. His gaze is not up into the father’s eyes. I wonder why. Some writers suggest that the son is not returning in a spirit of repentance, but is scheming to return home where he will not starve. "...I am dying here with hunger. I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight..." Perhaps, the prodigal’s plan suggests a manipulation of the father, and the son averts his gaze away from his father. Other writers suggest that the son has indeed repented. This view seems consistent with the context. The story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son are a trilogy whose theme is repentance: "...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents..." and "...there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents..." The son averts his gaze in sorrow, shame, remorse, and perhaps anxiety over his father's response.

Repentance is more than changing one's mind. It represents a complexity of beliefs and actions taken in an on-going situation laden with emotions, thoughts, and actions as well as consequences. The end result of repentance, from scripture's point of view, is refreshment and forgiveness: "...repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19). The point in time that Rembrandt captures reminds us that repentance is a journey whose end has not yet been reached. The shame, the questionable motives, the weakness of human nature, and the emotional consequences of sin will be dealt along the journey in God's time. Refreshment will come as the relationship with the father is rebuilt.

I look at the other figures in the painting and I wonder who they are. In the background you can clearly see two people—a woman, standing, and a man with a broad black hat who is sitting. Hidden in the shadows are two other figures. What is going through their minds? Do they share in the deep emotions of the father with his son? At first glance, one would think so. The homecoming of a wayward son should be a time of great rejoicing. Or perhaps, does the old man's impassive expression hide his feelings of disgust toward the prodigal and perhaps toward the father who may be overly eager to welcome his wayward son? It remains to be seen just how much happiness these people share with the father.

There are complex emotions here, and to plumb the depths of these emotions beckons all of the understanding of human nature that a person can muster. Psychology can help us fathom the mercy of the father, the motivations of the son, and the suspicion, pride and self-righteousness of the elder brother. Psychology can also help us understand the painter, a man whose life was characterized by excesses and marred by sorrow.
Rembrandt was born in Leiden on July 15, 1606. Simple yet pious parents with firmly rooted religious convictions raised him. As time went on, he acquired a deep reverence for the Bible and this had a profound influence on his later spiritual development. In his paintings, Rembrandt reveals an understanding of the spiritual and emotional qualities of life, especially in old age.

Rembrandt married Saskia van Uylenburgh, the cousin of a successful art dealer, in 1634. The marriage enhanced his career and brought him into contact with wealthy patrons who eagerly sought out his services. She had a substantial fortune, and this allowed Rembrandt to indulge in an extravagant lifestyle. He spent a great deal of money on an extensive collection of art. At auctions, he would often place an opening bid so high that no one else could place a bid. He bought a large house that later would place further strain on his resources.

At this same period, his personal life was characterized by a series of tragedies that eventually brought changes in his human and artistic outlook. His mother died in 1640. Saskia and Rembrandt had four children. Rumbartus, Cornelia I and Cornelia II all died in infancy. Only the last child, Titus, survived. Then Saskia died one year after his birth. Rembrandt and Saskia had been married but eight years. Geertghe Dirx was engaged as a nurse for Titus, but this eventually led to a breach of promise lawsuit that dragged on for years until 1650. The lawsuit ended with her confinement to a mental hospital.

Rembrandt's financial condition grew steadily worse. A change in his artistic style led to a decline in his reputation and popularity. In 1656, Rembrandt was forced to declare bankruptcy due to his over-zealous lifestyle. Hendrickje Stoffels entered his life as his housekeeper and eventually became his common-law wife. The church objected and repeatedly rebuked Hendrickje. She was punished by exclusion from communion. Saskia's will prevented Rembrandt from remarrying at the risk of losing the small income from her estate. Rembrandt was dealt a serious blow when Hendrickje died in 1663. He loved her dearly. Titus died in 1668, only eleven months before Rembrandt's death at the age of 63. It is very likely that Titus' death occurred during the painting of The Return of the Prodigal Son.

I wonder how Rembrandt's life impacted the way in which he dealt with the subject. All of these misfortunes seemed to "have only a purifying effect upon his human outlook", claims Jakob Rosenberg in his book, Rembrandt: Life and Work. Rembrandt began painting landscapes as well as human subjects with a more penetrating eye. An element of simplicity entered his work. He paid more attention to true human values and his interpretation of the Bible exhibited a greater sincerity.

Some might wonder why I even introduce Rembrandt's painting as a way of understanding the parable. Why not just stick with scripture? Just as our understanding of the parable is heightened by our knowledge of the Jewish culture, so our understanding can be nurtured by those who have grappled with similar challenges of life. The image is passed down through an artist's brush with no claim of inerrancy or inspiration. The point is that Rembrandt is engaged in the same task we are engaged in--of trying to understand the parable, of incorporating its truths in our life, and of passing on our understandings to others in community. Just as the father, the son, the elder brother and the onlookers are all image-bearers of God, we too are image-bearers that share certain mind-sets and emotions and motives with them at any point in time. This allows us to take their perspective and put ourselves in their shoes (or sandals). We may discern the motives and actions very accurately or we may miss by a mile. Please recall that there is a unity of truth here, created by God and under His dominion. As we explore this truth, there is an almost seamless quality of moving to and fro through the exploration of human motives and emotions, sometimes speaking with the voice of a psychologist, sometimes speaking with the voice of a theologian, and sometimes speaking with the voice of a repentant on their journey to wholeness and refreshment.

Psychology asks meaningful questions, especially if we have the spiritual ears to hear. Spiritual truth and psychological meanings can be complementary. We need not be afraid of the discipline of psychology if we allow the Spirit of God to quicken our souls and our minds to His truth. The point that I am making is that the master artist reveals a depth of understanding of this parable that is both spiritual and psychological. You can understand the concepts of love, relationship, guilt, motivation, pride, jealousy, repentance and forgiveness through the study of psychology. And you can even deepen your understanding through personal experience. And then, at some point in time, prompted by the Spirit of God, your soul is stirred to its very depths and you awaken to new meanings of life...of redemption...of mercy...of refreshment. It is then that you realize that the discipline of psychology is but humankind’s noble attempt to understand truth--and that is a very God-honoring ambition.

Do not make the mistake of interpreting the painting literally. Rembrandt represented divine love and mercy in their power to transform life. The scarlet of the father's cloak represents love, love that seeks us out and will not let go of us, regardless of our state. The earlier etching of the same subject is vastly different--it was a very literal rendition of the biblical text. It shows the son's face as if to place equal emphasis on the father and the son. But in the later rendition, the importance of the son is overshadowed by the love of the father.

So you see--it is no accident that I have selected this painting to represent the integration of psychology with Christian faith.
The painting does not suggest for a moment that all the players in this tragedy have come to some great spiritual awakening. On the contrary, one can question how far along the two sons are in their quest. But our gaze moves toward the father, and it is there that we rest in our search for meaning. You see it in his occluded eyes. You see it in his arms, as they tenderly embrace the undeserving son. You can sense unrelenting mercy and love and forgiveness. Mercy that restores. Mercy that is bestowed even in the face of perhaps profound regret at belated spiritual awakenings. The Return of the Prodigal Son reminds us that we are works in progress. Now we can return to the vocation of building relationships in a world that often struggles to find meaning.

I invite you to take the time to reflect on the image of the father’s welcome. It is not there by accident. It beckons you to take the time to reflect on enduring truths.

The State Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg, Russia, retains all rights to The Return of the Prodigal Son.

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