

# Home Tonight

*Further Reflections on the Parable of the Prodigal Son*  
By Henri Nouwen

An Autumn Home Study animated by Canon Jim Irvine  
Beginning September 14 and 16

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## **The Parable of the Lost Son**

*Jesus said:* “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father

has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

[*New International Version* – Luke 11:11-32]

**From Loneliness to Community – BE ATTENTIVE TO THE “SIGNS”**

Feeding the pigs and close to despair, the runaway prodigal knew that his life *had* to change. A certain hope was born when he considered going home, but that was soon replaced by shame, fear, and the utter impossibility of such a simple move. But his options were limited, so glimmerings of excitement around thoughts of “home” persisted. Because he listened, he was one day able to turn with uneasy confidence and begin his journey home. ...

To live authentically each of us must be aware of our “within.” We need to become conscious of feeling content, safe, and in the right place, and of feeling lonely, disillusioned, or mildly depressed. In front of turmoil, what do we do? Wise teachers tell us to be *very* attentive at these moments, to be open to “signs,” feelings, comments, a line in a book, unexpected meetings or events that may move us to consider new directions, to refind balance, and to remain fully alive.

*Spiritual signs* usually have four characteristics: They are  
(1) simple not complicated,  
(2) persistent,  
(3) seemingly impossible, and

(4) always about others as well as ourselves.

Be attentive when you experience these on your journey. Try to recognize an opportunity as well as a difficulty. Try not to respond too quickly. Pray for wisdom. Seek advice and refuse to act until you have external affirmation for your direction. Take time to believe in your free choice before you move forward in a new direction.

**The Younger Son** – CELEBRATION

“A festival is a sign of heaven. It symbolises our deepest aspiration—an experience of total communion.”† The old father in the parable spontaneously knew the appropriate response to a long-desired homecoming. He ordered the servants to “kill the fatted calf and prepare a feast.” We aren’t told whether or not the contrite runaway was ready to be celebrated as “a beloved with whom there is total communion.” But we often can identify with a certain shameful reluctance in ourselves to be celebrated with similar unconditional affection.

In the university setting I lost the real meaning of “festival,” but the simple gestures of love and affirmation at Daybreak remind me that celebration is much more than a party or a spectacle. I’m touched when we pause at the end of a delicious, noisy birthday meal and each one announces to the celebrant unique gratitude for his or her life. I’m moved when following a death we gather to tell stories, laugh, cry, and remember together. I’m touched each spring when Ellen’s parents arrive with several others from the Khahila to share the Seder supper and point us to God’s presence through the history of the “chosen people.” And there is real joy when Friday night worship ends and people

spontaneously begin to dance during the final hymn! Celebrating is rejoicing in friendship, lifting a glass because of it, affirming each other, and knowing gratitude in our hearts.

As a spiritual discipline of love, celebration is, beyond partying and entertaining, a well-prepared meeting of wonderment and friendship. Utilize your creativity to fashion simple “fiestas” to overtly affirm, bless, and lift up a loved one. And when you are the one being celebrated, really try to be simple and receive true nourishment for your unsteady heart.

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† Vanier, Jean. *Community and Growth*, London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2nd revised edition, 1989.

**The Elder Son** – LOVE THOSE WHO ARE DIFFERENT

Prevented by resentment from any identification with his younger sibling, the firstborn son indignantly refers his father to “That son of yours...” The loving father, without judging either child, gently reminds the elder of his important connection with the younger:

Your brother was lost.

I’m getting the message that I’m a beloved child so it’s time for me to stop offering friendship to my friends and withholding love from my “enemies.” Now I want to recognize many real sisters and brothers from the place of my own acting shamefully and also leaving home. I want to grow in likeness to the father figure in the parable.

Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount, “Love your enemies.” Rationally that makes no sense at all since the enemy is, by definition, the one that we do not love. But Jesus not only spoke this wisdom. He lived it. As disciples, we try to follow his teaching and see ourselves as brothers and sisters in the human family, no better and no worse than any other person. Let us look at the life of Jesus and learn the meaning of his teachings about difficult relationships.

Do good to those who hate you, bless those

who curse you, and pray for those who treat you badly. Treat others as you would like people to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit can you expect? Even sinners love those who love them. Instead, love your enemies, and do good to them, and lend without any hope of return. You will have great reward, and you will be children of the Most High. God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

*Luke 6*

**The Hidden Exile of Resentment** – BEFRIEND THE POOR

In the parable there were two very different perspectives about the young runaway. The elder child was scandalized and broke relational ties with a younger brother. But the brokenhearted father never lost hope for the return of a beloved child. The former maintained his illusions of a perfect world and refused permission to his sibling to experiment or to fail. The latter with more life experience accepted the mystery of human suffering with compassion and tenderness.

At L'Arche Daybreak I initially felt exhilarated in an environment acceptable for people with disabilities to *not* have their lives totally together! But not long afterward my own life fell apart and I was the one who was suddenly and totally unable to function! Heartfelt prayers with gestures of love were heaped upon me from some of the weakest members of the community, a few of whom gently put a hand on my shoulder and said, "Don't worry, Henri. You're going to be OK." With the outpouring of this genuine tenderness in my weakest hour, I began to penetrate Jesus' words, "Blessed are the poor."

As a spiritual practice consider fostering a real relationship with one who is visibly marginalized. Look beyond bizarre behavior,

unfamiliar humor, or a broken body and offer mutual friendship. Step beyond fear, beyond being a do-gooder, beyond controlling the relationship, and discover beyond the handicap a precious sister or brother. From your unlikely friend you may be surprised to feel that you, too, are truly lovable and blessed just as you are.

**The Primal Relationship** – CLAIM YOUR INNER “SPIRIT” LIFE

In the parable both siblings are preoccupied with themselves because neither has inwardly matured enough to feel responsible for belonging in this, their family of origin. The mature one, the father figure, lives with a deep interiority and is fully composed, fully accepting of his position in the family, and uniquely committed to each family member.

Unfortunately my interiority up to now has been to claim my many disturbing “spirits”; angry feelings, painful dreams, troubling fantasies, and hurts around unresolved relationships, more than to be attentive to the Spirit of Jesus, who also occupies my inner landscape. Now I’m working to adopt the practice of speaking directly and often to the God-Spirit living within me.

Jesus announced the availability of the Giver of Life for an inner relationship of communion with each one of us. He said,

If you love me you will keep my word, and my Father will love you and we shall come to you and make a home in you. (*John 14:23*)

I shall ask the Father, who will give you another Paraclete to be with you for ever, the Spirit of Truth whom the world can never

accept since it neither sees nor knows God;  
but you know the Spirit with you and in you.  
(*John* 14:16-17)

In the Scripture Jesus is very often found to be in communion with the Divine Love. He goes to the mountain and spends the whole night in prayer to God. He speaks his inner union aloud on the Cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

*Communion under  
Special Circumstances*

## Home Tonight

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*Brothers and sisters* in Christ,  
God calls us to faithful service  
by the proclamation of the word,  
and sustains us with the sacrament  
of the body and blood of Christ.  
[*Hear now God's word, and*] receive  
this holy food from the Lord's table.

Most merciful God,  
**we confess that we have sinned  
against you  
in thought, word, and deed,  
by what we have done,  
and by what we have left undone.  
We have not loved you with our  
whole heart;  
we have not loved our neighbours  
as ourselves.  
We are truly sorry and we humbly  
repent.  
For the sake of your Son Jesus  
Christ,  
have mercy on us and forgive us,  
that we may delight in your will,  
and walk in your ways,  
to the glory of your name. Amen.**

*The priest shall say...*  
Almighty God have mercy upon you,  
pardon and deliver you from all your  
sins,  
confirm and strengthen you in all

goodness,  
and keep you in eternal life;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

*Before Communion...*  
As our Saviour taught us, let us pray,  
**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against  
us.  
Save us from the time of trial,  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours,  
now and for ever. Amen.**

The gifts of God for the People of God.  
**Thanks be to God.**

*After Communion...*  
Glory to God,  
**whose power, working in us,  
can do infinitely more  
than we can ask or imagine.  
Glory to God from generation to  
generation,  
in the Church and in Christ Jesus,  
for ever and ever. Amen.**

*Dismissal...*  
Let us bless the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**