Meditation – Coming Home
Scripture Readings – Genesis 33:1-11, Luke 15:11-33
Sunday, September 8, 2024
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Our first reading, found in Genesis 33:1-11, recalls the homecoming of Jacob and his reunion with his older twin brother Esau. Twenty-one years have passed since Jacob deceived Esau into selling him his birthright and their father Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing that belonged to Esau as the first born. Jacob is now a mature, wealthy man; however, going home brought back the shame of his youth and the fear of his brother. Prior to their meeting Jacob spends a restless night alone wrestling with an angel. Because Jacob feared revenge he preempted their reunion with diplomatic gifts. Instead of revenge Jacob found favor and forgiveness in his brother Esau. Hear now God's Holy Word.

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.

When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, "Who are these with you?" Jacob said, "The children whom God has graciously given your servant…" Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord." But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." Jacob said, "No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor. Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want." So Jacob urged Esau, and he took it. Amen.

Both of our scripture readings are stories about homecoming and forgiveness. Our second is found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15:11-33, where we read a familiar parable about the homecoming of a younger son. Jesus shares the rituals and celebrations that follow and the dilemma of his overjoyed father who loves both his sons and who longs for them to find reconciliation and forgiveness in one another. Listen to what the spirit is saying:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So, he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. So he set off and went to his father. But while he was yet at a distance his father saw him and had compassion, and ran to him and embraced him, and kissed him. Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what was going on. He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a servant for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' " Amen.

The title of the meditation: Coming Home

The text: *"his father saw him and was filled with compassion…" Luke 15:20b*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for welcoming us home with a tender embrace. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Michael Smith wrote a ballot entitled "The Dutchman," which I first heard as a young woman in Chicago. It's a love song. The Dutchman and Margaret have journeyed through life together and he has favor in her eyes. The ballot talks about the beauty of the Netherlands and the mystery of love. In the music and words, we see the golden summers in Amsterdam and in the banks of the ocean where the walls rise above the Zeiderzee, we see the wideness of God's mercy. And when the Dutchman gets lost along the canal, we see *Margaret come to take him home again through unforgiving streets that trip him.*

The lyric *unforgiving streets that trip him* has stayed with me since I first heard. In this brief metaphor Smith has captured an experience common to each of us. I'm not sure what the unforgiving streets were in the Dutchman's life, but I have learned to recognize them in my own. We each walk down *unforgiving streets*, which have the potential to *trip us* time and time again by the painful memories—the feelings of hurt and bitterness they evoke. Each one of us knows how painful these unforgiving streets are to travel, so let us resist any trite or superficial cliché. There is no formula or magic to turn our unforgiving streets into gold.

Jacob came face to face with this truth when he realized he could not return home without coming face to face with his brother Esau. Although an accomplished and wealthy man, Jacob would not come into his own until he dealt with an unresolved relationship in his childhood. In Esau's presence, Jacob is confronted with the truth about himself, his character, and his betrayal. The most surprising character within this story is Esau. What a delightful paradox that the brother who reflects the grace of God in his ability to forgive is the son who was denied his birthright and blessing.

Jacob's homecoming and reconciliation with Esau is almost verbatim to the homecoming of the younger brother in the parable of the prodigal. *But while he was yet at a distance his father saw him and had compassion, and ran to him and embraced him, and kissed him.* Placing these two stories of homecoming and reconciliation side by side accentuates the meaning of Jesus' parable and how God longs for us to forgive and embrace one another.

In Henri Nouwen's book *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* our understanding of this parable is enriched by the thoughtful reflection of one Dutch priest on the artistic work of another Dutch painter. Nouwen explores Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal (featured on the cover of today's bulletin), a painting that led Nouwen on his own spiritual journey and homecoming. Nouwen reflects on the father's hands with the following words:

The true center of Rembrandt's painting is the hands of the father. On them all the light is concentrated; in them mercy becomes flesh; upon them forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing come together. From the moment I first saw the painting… I felt drawn to those hands. I did not fully understand why. Gradually over the years I have come to know these hands.

They have held me from the hour of my conception, they welcomed me at my birth, held me close to my mother's breast, fed me, and kept me warm. They have protected me in times of danger and consoled me in times of grief. They have waved me good-bye and always welcomed me home. Those hands are God's hands. They are also the hands of my parents, teachers, friends, healers, and all those whom God has given me to remind me how safely I am held.

The longer I looked at the hands of 'the patriarch' the clearer it became to me that Rembrandt had done something quite different from letting God pose as the wise old head of the family. The two hands are quite different. The father's left hand touching the son's shoulder is strong and muscular… Even though there is a gentleness in the way the father's left hand touches his son, it is not without a firm grasp. How different is the father's right hand! It is refined, soft, and very tender. The fingers are close to each other, and they have an elegant quality. It wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother's hand.

Nouwen continues: *As soon as I recognized the difference between the two hands, a new world of meaning opened for me. The Father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand... God is, indeed, God, in whom both manhood and womanhood, fatherhood and motherhood, are fully present.*

And so, under the aspect of an old Jewish patriarch, there emerges also a motherly God receiving her son home… But her joy will not be complete until all who have received life from her have returned home and gather around the table prepared for them…

As we gather around the table prepared for us in this sacrament and begin a new year of reminding our children how safely they are held, may we be the hands that provide a reassuring touch and firm support along the way through the unforgiving streets that can trip us and may we each experience the welcome and embrace of God's hands, full of mercy and compassion, in our coming home. Amen.