

Read this selection from *The Return of the Prodigal Son* and consider the ideas you've heard in the video about asking for help in safe relationships. Think about the freedom that is offered when we trust God that we are who He says we are.

The Return of the Prodigal Son

by Henri Nouwen

Henri J. M. Nouwen was a Catholic priest who taught at several theological institutes and universities in his home country of the Netherlands and in the United States. He shared the final years of his life with people with mental and physical disabilities at the L'Arche Daybreak Community in Toronto, Canada. He died in 1996. He authored many books on the spiritual life, including *Reaching Out*, *The Wounded Healer*, *The Inner Voice of Love*, and *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

Prologue: Encounter with A Painting – The Poster

“A seemingly insignificant encounter with a poster presenting a detail of Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* set in motion a long spiritual adventure that brought me to a new understanding of my vocation and offered me new strength to live it. At the heart of this adventure is a seventeenth-century painting and its artist, a first-century parable and its author, and a twentieth-century person in search of life's meaning.

The story begins in the fall of 1983 in the village of Trosly, France, where I was spending a few months at L'Arche, a community that offers a home to people with mental handicaps. Founded in 1964 by a Canadian, Jean Vanier, the Trosly community is the first of more than ninety L'Arche communities spread throughout the world.

One day I went to my friend Simone Landrien in the community's small documentation center. As we spoke, my eyes fell on a large poster pinned on her door. 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.” (pp. 3-4)

The following quote is from

Introduction: The Younger Son, The Elder Brother, and The Father

“It was during this period of immense inner pain that another friend spoke the word that I most needed to hear and opened up the third phase of my spiritual journey. Sue Mosteller, who had been with the Daybreak community from the early seventies and had played an important

role in bringing me there, had given me indispensable support when things had become difficult, and had encouraged me to struggle through whatever needed to be suffered to reach true inner freedom. When she visited me in my “hermitage” and spoke with me about the Prodigal Son, she said, “Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father.”

Her words struck me like a thunderbolt because, after all my years of living with the painting and looking at the old man holding his son, it had never occurred to me that the father was the one who expressed most fully my vocation in life.

Sue did not give me much chance to protest: “You have been looking for friends all your life; you have been craving for affection as long as I’ve known you; you have been interested in thousands of things; you have been begging for attention, appreciation, and affirmation left and right. The time has come to claim your true vocation – to be a father who can welcome his children home without asking them any questions and without wanting anything from them in return. Look at the father in your painting and you will know who you are called to be. We, at Daybreak, and most people around you don’t need you to be a good friend or even a kind brother. We need you to be a father who can claim for himself the authority of true compassion.”

Looking at the bearded old man with his full red cloak, I felt deep resistance to thinking about myself in that way. I felt quite ready to identify myself with the spendthrift younger son or the resentful elder son, but the idea of being like the old man who had nothing to lose because he had lost all, and only to give, overwhelmed me with fear. Nevertheless, Rembrandt died when he was sixty-three years old and I am a lot closer to that age than to the age of either of the two sons. Rembrandt was willing to put himself in the father’s place; why not I?

The year and a half since Sue Mosteller’s challenge has been a time to begin claiming my spiritual fatherhood. It has been a slow and arduous struggle, and sometimes I still feel the desire to remain the son and never to grow old. But I also have tasted the immense joy of children coming home and laying hands on them in a gesture of forgiveness and blessing. I have come to know in a small way what it means to be a father who asks no questions, wanting only to welcome his children home.” (pp. 21-23)