

Wanderer, Come Home

Guide for a Half-Day Lenten Prayer Retreat

By: Evelyn Bertsche, Cindy Breeze, Art Dyck, Florence Schloneger, Larry Wilson,
Illinois Lent planning team, 1995.

Advanced Planning:

- *Read Henri Nouwen's The Return of the Prodigal Son.*
- *Plan for worship centres and communion elements*
- *Prepare handouts for the three meditation times, each with scripture text and corresponding questions.*
- *Consider ordering a copy(ies) of the Rembrandt prints*

The Invitation – “Come Home!”

(30 minutes)

Worship Centre – White tablecloth, the print of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, two lit candles

As people arrive, invite them to be seated in a circle. Make sure that everyone in the group has been introduced. If it seems appropriate, invite each person to express a hope or desire for this quiet time. Begin the retreat with prayer.

Give a brief introduction to the season of Lent as a spiritual journey with its destination our own Easter experience. Lent is a time for reflection, repentance and preparation for our homecoming into resurrection life. It is a time for examination and turning away from all that is not in harmony with abundant living and turning to God in love.

For those who may not have participated in a “quiet day” before, explain that there will be times spent together in silence as a group and individually. Opportunity will be given for quiet reflection, prayer and journal writing. Encourage people to find a place where they are comfortable for the periods of individual quiet time.

Introduce the theme of this retreat. Indicate that there will be three meditation times focusing on each of the three characters in the story of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. After a brief introduction in the group, participants are encouraged to find a quiet place somewhere in the building for reflection on the handout scripture and questions, meditation and prayer. Participants are free to spend more time looking at the Rembrandt print in silence.

Read the theme text – Luke 15:11-32.

Sing the theme song – HWB 491 – “Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling.” You may want to plan the refrain to call the people together and then sing it at the close of each of the three meditation times.

The Younger Son – Defiant Rejection

Luke 15:11-14

(5-10 minutes introduction; 40-50 minutes quiet time)

Worship Centre – Black cloth, red drape, dusty sandals, scruffy duffel bag/back pack, money bag with loosely spilled coins

By prematurely asking for his inheritance, the younger son wished his father's death. He left his home of unconditional acceptance and wandered off to faraway places searching for love. At the heart of his search was this question: "To whom do I belong – to my all-loving parent or to the world?" The depth of divine love is found in the fact that he was loved so much that he had freedom both to leave and return home.

If you have the Rembrandt print, you may want to call attention to these things about the younger son:

- the shaved and yet almost newborn shape of the head,
- the tattered underclothes and emaciated body,
- the scarred foot and broken sandal,
- the retained nobleman's sword,
- the obeisant position before the dignified and sheltering father.

Suggestions for Meditation

- Name the voices that I hear saying, "Go out and prove your worth."
- In what desperate condition do I find myself when I leave the place of unconditional acceptance and go seeking love elsewhere?
- When I desire to return to God, what inner dialogues do I prepare to explain myself?
- Can I trust God's love enough to return completely impoverished and undefended?
- How might it be easier to be the servant than to truly claim my place as God's child? What are my fears?

The Elder Son – Resentful Obedience

Luke 15:25-32

(5-10 minutes introduction; 40-50 minutes quiet time)

The elder son has wandered from the father's love just as surely as the younger one. On the outside he dutifully fulfills his obligations. On the inside he carries a burden of resentment which depletes him as much as wayward living destroys his younger brother. Resentment permeates his soul until there is no room for joy. And yet he is offered everything the father owns. This son faces the most difficult of all journeys. To allow himself to enter the father's embrace, he first will have to recognize that he has left it.

Notice these things about the elder son in the Rembrandt print:

- The similarities to the father, yet the space that separates them
- The differences in their hands, cloaks, and posture
- The feeling of struggle about whether or not to allow the father's love to touch him

Suggestions for Meditation

- What are the obligations I dutifully fulfill that cause me to feel trapped and miserable?
- How might I be tempted to become resentful of those who seem free to go their own way and do their own thing?
- Are there ways I feel I've never been recognized, had what I deserved, or am afraid I might be excluded when others are having a good time?
- Can I trust God's love enough to let go of my own goodness, face my own poverty, and come home to a loving embrace?

The Father – Welcoming Love

Luke 15:20b, 22-24, 31-32

(5-10 minutes introduction; 40-50 minutes quiet time)

Jesus said, "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate." When we have come home to the embrace of divine love, we are called to also open our arms and offer unconditional love. As our Heavenly Parent poured out to us the riches of an immense heart, so we cannot hoard the gift of love for ourselves. We are asked to become welcoming love for others.

Notice these things about the Rembrandt print:

- The differences in the father's two hands (one a strong man's hand; the other a caressing woman's hand)
- The sheltering cloak
- The half-blind eyes
- The bent-over body
- The feeling that patient, waiting love is now able to rest

Suggestions for Meditation

- What kinds of immature dependencies will I need to let go to become the welcoming parent?
- What kinds of social pressures keep me from giving compassion to the wounded prodigals who wander into my life?
- Can I give up power so that I can give without wanting anything in return and love without any conditions?
- Am I willing to grieve, to forgive, and give of myself?
- Am I willing to lose everything so that I am free to love unconditionally?

The Celebration – Homecoming

(30 minutes)

Worship Centre – White cloth, purple drape, two candles, Rembrandt print, cup and plate with communion elements

When people have gathered in the circle, invite them (as the younger brother, the elder brother, and the father) to come to the table as a symbol of “homecoming.” They may dip the bread into the cup or eat it in a way appropriate to the group. Close the communion time with a prayer of thanksgiving.

Break the silence by inviting each person to reflect on their experience during the retreat. It is important not to expect everyone to share as some things may be too personal and/or not yet ready for words. Simply allow space for those who wish to speak.

Conclude with a hymn and a prayer of blessing for each one present.

Possible hymns: HWB 143 “Amazing Grace”
 HWB 575 “Precious Lord, take my hand”
 HWB 506 “I sought the Lord”