

LENTEN SEASON

Penitential preparation for Christ's death and resurrection

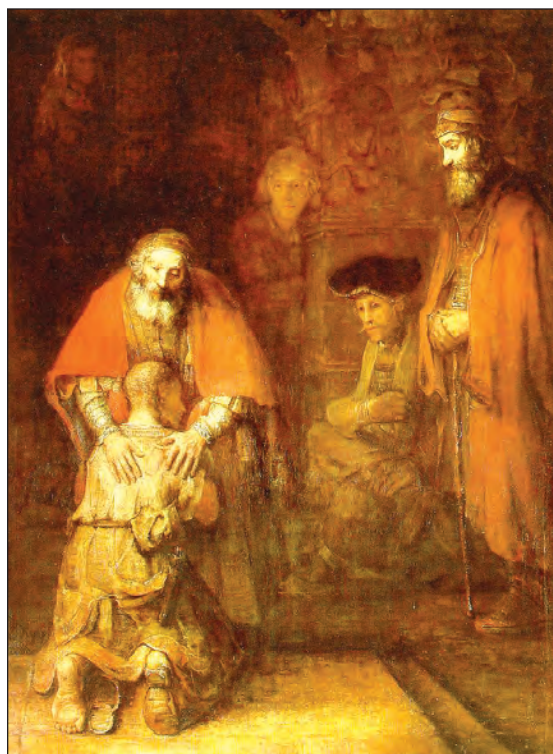
Lent: Let's talk Rembrandt!

Written by **Father Jim Schellenberg**, for Today's Catholic

A few weeks ago, the Christian community began the holy season of Lent. This is a time of prayer, fasting, devotionals and service. This is one time of the year where people of faith go deep into their spirit to better understand their relationship with God, neighbor and self.

As I meditate on this article, I am reminded of Henri J.M. Nouwen text *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. I was introduced to this text while visiting one of the counselors at Brooke Army Medical Center. Over his chair was a copy of Rembrandt's painting "The Return of the Prodigal Son." This painting depicts the brokenness of a son returning home. The colors are dark with only the images of the son, father, and onlookers being revealed. Anyone of us can be in that painting. It is possible we have all had a time in our lives "returning home?" Of the many sections in Nouwen's text, there is one that stands out entitled *Rembrandt and the Father*. Henri Nouwen hits the nail on the head when he describes this painting where "everything come together: Rembrandt's story, humanity's story and God's story." It almost sounds like the greatest commandment but in reversal – loving self, neighbor and God. So maybe this might be a good clue for us, the faithful, as how best to continue our approach in Lent: Start with revisiting your own story on how you love yourself, connecting it with humanity's story and finally allowing God's story to paint a picture of who you are in this shell of a body with spirit. I wonder if we too might come away with the same impression that Nouwen's saw in Rembrandt's "The Prodigal Son."

The first insight that Nouwen saw was Rembrandt's story. What did Nouwen see? One question to be raised is what is it about our own stories that define who we are as individuals and as the People of God. Stories are the narratives where individuals, families and congregations give permission to others to listen to another's soul. It is not uncommon in many retreats that participants are given opportunities to express themselves through story. To best understand one's story is to understand the influences in one's life. So, the question then becomes "What is it about your story, like Rembrandt's Prodigal Son, which needs to be re-examined." What are the signposts in your life where you felt you knew better than anyone else what you needed? And like the Prodigal Son why you felt that you needed to get away? What were the emotions of the Prodigal Son in his leav-



The Return of the Prodigal Son, Rembrandt, circa 1668.

ing? Did he say harsh words, leave in the night, or just run away?

The second insight that Nouwen saw in Rembrandt's painting was pain and the need for "humanity to reconcile with one another." Have any of you felt there were times you may have cut yourselves from the family, the human family or the family of the Church? As a former Catholic chaplain at Brooke Army Medical Center, on many occasions I came into contact with humanity in its rawest form. For some of the patients being hospitalized this was their time to experience "the agony in the garden." In many cases this all began when patients would ask themselves "why me?" How can this illness, trauma, or need for surgery be happening to me? How did I allow myself to get into this condition? Why did I do this to myself and or my family? What is my life about? Where is God at this time? These questions can be raised in any experience within the human condition. Have you shared these same questions with others? One can only think that the Prodigal Son, after losing all of his money, must have had similar thoughts and questions. It was in this darkness time of his life that he came to the realization that needed to "go home and reconcile with his father."

In the upcoming weeks, many parishes will have

reconciliation services and times for confessions. These are opportunities for the faithful to acknowledge there are times when reconciliation with self, neighbor and God are needed to restore the balance in their lives. While I witnessed many moments of healing through medical help, none can compare to the power of forgiveness and love to bring about healing. Love and forgiveness are not only necessary for one's blood family, but also for all of humanity. It goes without saying that today the human spirit is being stretched with war, migration, lack of water, cultural wars, destruction of the environment and the growing space between the haves and have's not. I wonder if Rembrandt saw the same thing in the people of Amsterdam? If humanity is to survive, then humanity must be intentional in eliminating war, overcoming poverty, protecting the environment and dignity of all persons, and dealing with capitalistic greed. One may ask how is this possible? It is through love and forgiveness relationships are healed.

Finally, what was God's story in Rembrandt's painting of The Return of the Prodigal Son. Prodigal is a word that means wastefully extravagant or going overboard with wealth. Whereas what we see in the painting is a son broken and poor and the generous love of a father pouring out for this son who came home. This story must have struck a chord in Rembrandt's life because he painted it twice. Let me share something with you from my own story. Back in the day I tried my hand with the

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paint brush. Over time I had forgotten about these pieces of art and then one day I saw them hanging in the small den "behind my father's chair." I am not sure what he made of them, but he knew I did them and he kept them close by. I am glad he kept them as I now have them in my home remembering where they once hung "behind my father's chair." It was in the moment of darkness the son came to an awareness of his father's love. His father's love was a reflection of God's own story of love.

As we move through Lent to Holy Week and Easter take time to re-visit Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son. Think about your own story's and how it is connected with humanity's story and God's story. For ourselves as Christian believers, it is when we merge the story of Jesus with our own story, that the dots of faith, life and service come together to reveal the "true color of our hearts." God is the artist who wants to brush away our sins and with a new canvass of grace paint us as intended: the People of God! A new creation!