



Becoming All Ear: Henri Nouwen and the Deep Reading of Scripture

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Last summer, our family visited the Art Gallery of Ontario while vacationing in Toronto. Some members of the family had little interest in an art gallery, except to dash through and glimpse paintings by the masters; I suspected this would not be a leisurely exploration.

My kids and I walked to the rear of the building to meet my wife at the café, who arrived at the Gallery before the rest of us, having chosen to Uber rather than walk from the hotel. To reach the café, we had to pass through a gallery with red walls and religious art. In that room, one painting captured my attention.

More than seven feet tall, it loomed just to the right of the café entrance. At first, I thought it depicted Elijah, for at the top of the painting a raven hovered with a hunk of bread in its beak. Beneath the

How do we approach scripture? Do we fly through it, or do we sit with it and dwell in the text? Using Henri Nouwen's the Prodigal Son as a guide, how might we learn to engage with scripture in a deep and prayerful way?

raven, an elderly man with a white beard—shirtless, a woven blanket tumbling from his shoulders—looked toward the raven, surprise on his face. Other elements suggested it wasn't Elijah: a book sitting on stone table, a crucifix in the distance, prayer beads dangling from the man's hand. Then I read the label on the wall. Called *St. Paul the Hermit*, the painting, by the seventeenth century Italian artist Mattia Preti, depicts one of the final days in the life of St. Paul, an Egyptian regarded as the first desert hermit. According to legend, every day a raven brought St. Paul a half loaf of bread, until the day, memorialized in this painting, when St. Anthony came to visit him, and the raven delivered a whole loaf for the two to share.¹

I was drawn to the painting but wasn't sure why.

Unfortunately, I didn't have time to find out. My older son had learned where the two Monets and three Picassos hung, and he wanted to race off to see them. My younger son wanted to see the Rembrandt exhibit, my daughter wanted a latte, and the gallery would be closing soon. So, I snapped a picture of St. Paul with my phone and wandered off to consume as much art as I could in an hour.

I confess that my engagement with scripture too often mirrors my encounter with this painting. I do manage to pray with scripture most mornings, to sit, however briefly, with a text and a modestly open heart. But I don't do it the way the monks did, and still do—with a certain leisureliness, with that unguarded chewing on the word until it yields the sweet cream of contemplation. Most mornings some demand of the day pulls me from my chair sooner than I would like in the same way my kids dragged me from the painting.

Dealing with scripture as a preacher is little different. Each week those of us who preach plunder scripture for a “word from the Lord” suitable to the congregation. We feel the pressure to come up with a packageable takeaway, a pressure that militates against deep, prayerful lingering with scripture. Like Vikings raiding Irish monasteries in the Middle Ages, we raid a passage of scripture for its most obvious treasure, then move on to the next one. After all, Sunday is coming and, we've got to preach.

My whizzing through the Art Gallery of Ontario, like my habits of whizzing through scripture, call to mind theologian Paul Griffith's

¹ Mattia Preti, *St. Paul the Hermit*, c. 1656–1660, oil on canvas, Art Gallery of Ontario, accessed Oct. 4, 2024, <https://ago.ca/collection/object/67/36>.

account of what he calls consumerist reading, which he takes to be the primary mode of reading in late-capitalism. Consumerist readers “treat what they read only as objects for consumption, to be discarded when the end for which they are read has been achieved. . . . [These] readers read such works to gain ephemeral information, to titillate rather than cultivate, to entertain rather than transform.”² How many pastors find ways to read scripture other than as a consumer?

Griffith’s contrasts consumerist reading with “religious reading.” Griffiths’ description of religious reading is tantalizing because it names, at least for me, a kind of prayerful reading of scripture for which I long both as a preacher and as one seeking a life of prayer. Griffith writes,

The first and most basic element [of religious reading] is that the work read is understood as a stable and vastly rich resource, one that yields meaning, suggestions (or imperatives) for action, matter for aesthetic wonder, and much else. It is a treasure-house, an ocean, a mine: the deeper religious readers dig, the more ardently they fish, the more single-mindedly they seek gold the greater will be there reward. . . . [W]hat is there to be read always precedes, exceeds, and in the end supersedes its readers. There can, according to these metaphors, be no final act of reading in which everything is uncovered. . . . Reading, for religious readers, ends only with death, and perhaps not then: it is a continuous, ever repeated act.³

A word Griffith doesn’t use here but one I want to claim: This kind of reading is *prayer*.

HENRI NOUWEN, RELIGIOUS READER

After my brush with *St. Paul the Hermit*, I remembered Henri Nouwen’s encounter with Rembrandt’s painting the *Prodigal Son*. When he first saw the painting as a poster in a friend’s office, the painting spoke to him. Rather than rush on, forgetting the painting,

² Paul Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 42.

³ Griffiths, *Religious Reading*, 41.

Nouwen studied, observed, and reflected on Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*. For over a decade Nouwen dwelt with this painting in various ways, including visiting the original in St. Petersburg, Russia. He entered into an extended contemplation of a painting the fruit of which became his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.⁴ If my own hurrying through the Art Gallery of Ontario serves as a metaphor for consumerist reading, I wondered if Nouwen's long conversation with the *Prodigal Son* might display something of the depth and possibility of religious reading, of reading scripture as prayer. Nouwen "read"⁵ that painting for over a decade, alongside the story of the prodigal son in Luke's Gospel (Luke 15:11–32), through the changing circumstances of his life. He found himself in the story, in every aspect of it, and in so doing he discovered himself as part of God's story. His reading of this painting affirms Griffith's claim that there can be "no final act of reading in which everything is uncovered." Might we discover in Nouwen's approach to this painting elements of religious reading to challenge our consumerism and inform our own prayerful reading of scripture?

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In another place, Nouwen points to Jesus as an exemplar of openness to God. He writes, "Jesus was 'all ear.' That is true prayer: being all ear for God."⁶

All ear. That's what Nouwen was over the many years he contemplated Rembrandt's painting. He stood before the painting with empty

⁴ Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming* (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

⁵ From this point on I will not put "read" in quotation marks when referring to Nouwen's studying the painting. Additionally, I use the word "text" below to refer both to the painting and to Scripture.

⁶ Henri Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (New York: HarperOne, 1981), 68.

hands, naked and vulnerable, and read the painting deeply, and in so doing he invited the painting to read him. Fresh with my own glimpse of a compelling painting in mind, I began to wonder if uncovering *how* Nouwen read the *Prodigal Son* might illumine what it means to read scripture as “all ear”—to read it religiously, to read it as prayer.

ELEMENTS OF NOUWEN’S PRAYERFUL READING IN *THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON*

In what follows, I offer the fruits of my own reading of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. I examine the text, not so much to discover Nouwen’s spiritual insights about the painting itself and the story that inspired it—the way the book is most commonly read—but to discern his *way* of reading the painting trusting that his approach can inform our own reading scripture as prayer in the context of lives that encourage just the opposite—shallow, consumerist readings.

I glean five ingredients to prayerful reading from Nouwen’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

First, Nouwen’s contemplation of the painting embraces the changing contexts and circumstances of Nouwen’s life over many years and allows them to inform his reading of the painting. Unlike academic readings of texts that seek to bracket the context of the reader’s life, the circumstances of Nouwen’s life prove essential for his prayerful, contemplative encounter with the text of the painting. We discover that naming, honoring, and bringing “our condition” with us to the text shapes what we see and hear in the text itself, just as the text reveals and illumines aspects of our experience in a kind of mutual interpretation.

When Nouwen first saw a reproduction of the painting in 1983, he was exhausted from a lengthy lecturing tour. He recalls, “I was anxious, lonely, restless, and very needy. . . . It was in this condition that I first encountered Rembrandt’s *Prodigal Son*”⁷ This condition informed what he was able to notice in the painting: “My heart leapt when I saw it. After my long self-exposing journey, the tender embrace of the father and son expressed everything I desired at that moment.”⁸ This dynamic of allowing his condition to influence how

⁷ Nouwen, *Return*, 5.

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he sees the painting doesn't end with the first encounter. We see it over the years as he returns to the painting. In fact, the catalyst for his deepest engagement with painting was the devastating disruption of a relationship in 1986 that propelled Nouwen into a psychological crisis.⁹ Nouwen began working on the book in the years following his recovery from the breakdown. Furthermore, the structure of the book, with its successive meditations on the younger son, the older son, and the father, shows how the various contexts of Nouwen's life shaped what he found. At each stage, he relates his interpretation of the figure in the painting to his own life—his anxiety and loneliness as he reads the image of the prodigal himself; his anger and bitterness as he reads the image of the elder son; and his coming to understand his own call to become the father as he contemplates the father in the painting and the story. At each moment he brings his own story to the text, which allows him to hear the painting as a word to him, while at the same time allowing the painting to illumine aspects of his own life as yet obscure to him.

Nouwen's unabashed bringing of the circumstances of his life to his listening to Rembrandt's painting in no way means he undervalues scholarship to shape our hearing and understanding of what is read, which is the second ingredient of Nouwen's deep reading. Nouwen read voraciously about the life of Rembrandt and the historical context in which this painting came to be. In each section of the book, for instance, he relates the figure being discussed to Rembrandt's own life in order to understand why Rembrandt might have painted the characters the way he did. He also averred to biblical scholarship. In one place, the insight of a biblical scholar that the younger son's demanding his portion of the inheritance would have indicated his wishing the father dead opened the door to Nouwen's own connection with the passage: "This explanation is significant to me, not only because it provides me with an accurate understanding of the parable in its historical context, but also—and most of all—because it summons me to recognize the younger son in myself."¹⁰ Biblical scholarship proves a pathway to personal involvement.

⁹ Michael Ford, *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 172.

¹⁰ Nouwen, *Return*, 36.

For Nouwen scholarship is not an end in itself; it serves the enduring purpose of a religious text: to help readers read themselves in the story. Nouwen's approach supports Thomas Merton's claim that Biblical scholarship is necessary but not sufficient for a formational reading of scripture. Merton writes that making sense of the biblical text "requires two levels of understanding: first, a preliminary unraveling of the meaning of the texts themselves . . . which is mainly a matter of knowledge acquired by study; then a deeper level, a living insight which grows out of personal involvement and relatedness."¹¹ In relationship to both the painting the *Prodigal Son* and the story in Luke's Gospel, Nouwen evidences this approach again and again: an appreciation for the scholarly knowledge as a doorway to contemplative reading and personal appropriation.

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The third ingredient to Nouwen's ability to be "all ear" is perhaps the most obvious: patient, slow engagement with the text over an extended period of time. As noted above, Nouwen first encountered Rembrandt's painting in 1983. Three years later, Nouwen traveled to St. Petersburg to view the original painting.¹² He began working on the book that became *The Return of the Prodigal Son* in the late 1980s, and the book was published in 1992. In 1996 Nouwen was on a trip that would take him back to St. Petersburg to produce a film based on *The Return of the Prodigal Son* when he suffered a heart attack and died a few days later.¹³ From the moment a reproduction of Rembrandt's the *Prodigal Son* first grabbed him, it held onto him throughout the rest of his life. The last thirteen years of Nouwen's life were braided together with the painting and its corresponding biblical story.

¹¹ Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1970), 51–52, quoted in Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*, Newly Revised Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 21.

¹² Ford, *Wounded*, 173.

¹³ Ford, *Wounded*, 201.

His visit to see the painting in 1986 shows a microcosm of this aspect of deep reading. He writes, "While many tourist groups with their guides came and left in rapid succession, I sat on one of the red velvet chairs in front of the painting and just looked."¹⁴ His unhurried lingering with the painting bore a quality of attention unavailable to the rushed tourists: he just looked. Over the course of hours he noticed how his experience of the painting shifted as the light changed throughout the day: "Gradually I realized that there were as many paintings of the *Prodigal Son* as there were changes in the light."¹⁵ Nouwen discovered a complete open-endedness of the text that invited him to return repeatedly to it, trusting its mysteries would be revealed more deeply each time, until to his great surprise, he saw himself in the father: "When I first saw Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son* I could never have dreamt that becoming the repentant son was only a stop on the way to becoming the welcoming father."¹⁶ Prayerful reading, done patiently and with a posture of receptivity, affirms the possibility of surprise, that no reading can be exhaustive, that the text bears infinite riches, rewarding each return visit.

A fourth ingredient of Nouwen's deep reading: reading and entering the story imaginatively. Just as Rembrandt's painting is an imaginative retelling of a scene in the parable, so Nouwen entered the story with his own imagination, both finding himself in the story and following imaginatively where the details of the painting led. This willingness to find himself in the story is shown in the way Nouwen's language shifts from "him" to "I" as Nouwen tells his own story through the son's: "I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found."¹⁷ Similarly, he saw in himself the anger and bitterness of the elder son and, eventually, the compassionate welcome of the father.

In Nouwen's reading there is a remarkable freedom of the imagination that calls into question the dichotomy between exegesis and eisegesis, between reading out of the text and reading into it. In spiritual reading, this dichotomy collapses as the details of the work themselves inspire the imagination, liberating it to discover insights that

¹⁴ Nouwen, *Return*, 8.

¹⁵ Nouwen, *Return*, 9.

¹⁶ Nouwen, *Return*, 119.

¹⁷ Nouwen, *Return*, 43.

a historically constrained imagination might not. Just as Rembrandt “goes beyond the literal text of the parable”¹⁸ by placing the elder son in the scene of the younger son’s return, Nouwen himself feels free to imagine how the elder son’s story might unfold beyond the scope of the text: “How will the elder son look when he is free from his complaints, free from his anger, resentments, and jealousies?”¹⁹ A biblically inspired imagination compels Nouwen to ask this question and venture an answer.

Finally, Nouwen’s deep reading happens in community. In Nouwen’s broader spiritual vision, solitude and community go hand-in-hand, two necessary and complimentary aspects of a spiritual life.²⁰ *The Return of the Prodigal Son* largely reflects Nouwen’s discipline of solitude: his personal reading, private reflection, solitary gazing on the painting in St. Petersburg. But Nouwen was always sharing his insights and questions with his friends and trusted confidants. For instance, a few years after his first encounter with the painting, Nouwen shared with a friend his sense of kinship with the younger son. His friend replied, “I wonder if you are not more like the elder son,”²¹ a comment that opened to Nouwen new dimensions of the painting. Another example: after the intense personal crisis that required Nouwen to leave his ministry at L’Arche Daybreak, a community in Toronto, and spend months receiving psychological support at a “rather isolated place, far away from my friends and community,”²² another friend visited him, and as they were speaking about Rembrandt’s painting, this friend said, “Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father.”²³ Nouwen writes, “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.”²⁴ As one committed to the disciplines of community, Nouwen found in these holy friendships voices that could receive his words about what

¹⁸ Nouwen, *Return*, 63.

¹⁹ Nouwen, *Return*, 86.

²⁰ For example, see Nouwen, *Making All Things New*, 69–90.

²¹ Nouwen, *Return*, 20.

²² Nouwen, *Return*, 21.

²³ Nouwen, 22.

²⁴ Nouwen, 22.

the Spirit was speaking to him and, aware of his tendency toward self-pity and despair, could speak into his interpretive process: *their* voices became a part of his deep, prayerful reading.

Throughout the body of his work, Nouwen suggests that those seeking a life with God, a life of prayer, become, like Jesus, “all ear.” We can see in his reading of Rembrandt’s *the Prodigal Son*, alongside the parable in Luke’s gospel, what being “all ear” can entail. These five elements—bringing the changing context and circumstances of our lives to the text; allowing biblical scholarship to inform our prayerful reading without constraining it; reading texts patiently and over extended periods of time; trusting the imagination as we read; and reading texts within a community of spiritual friends—can open even more deeply the possibilities of being “all ear” before the God whose story we encounter in the biblical story.

These elements display the profound depths of what Paul Griffiths calls “religious reading,” but what I prefer to call by another name: prayer.

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SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR PREACHERS

Preachers know that weekly rhythms of church life, given Sunday’s relentless return and its insistence that we enter the pulpit with something to say, do not lend themselves to the kind of deep reading exemplified by Nouwen. How easily we become those Vikings, raiding the poor villages of the Bible! But many of us long for the quality of Nouwen’s reading increasingly show up in our own; we thirst for even our sermon preparation to be claimed by that word *prayer*. But let’s be

honest, not many are likely to spend over a decade with a single biblical story, so how can these elements show up in *our* reading practices nonetheless?

One suggestion for deeper, prayerful reading would be to read and pray with future texts for preaching several months out. In the same way that Rembrandt's painting worked its way into Nouwen's subconscious, and he carried it with him always, so we can allow the texts to enter us so that they become our companions as we are living our lives: watching TV, reading a book, taking a walk, counseling a parishioner, moderating a church business meeting. We can begin to do all these things through the lens of the texts that are within us as we are preparing to preach.

Perhaps more boldly—and this might test the patience of a congregation—we could choose to spend several weeks preaching on the *same* text, inviting congregation members to read and pray with the text over the same period of time and giving our imaginations (and theirs) the necessary time to work. Under cultural (and ecclesial) conditions that encourage rushing through one text and moving on to the next, this kind of preaching can model patience as we linger together; we would be testifying to our faith in the infinite depth of the Word and of the God whose story Scripture tells.

Additionally, we can make asking the questions “What is the current circumstance of the people? What are we going through? What is our context of life *right now*?” an explicit part of our sermon preparation. We can name as concretely as possible the shape of our current condition. Imagine it as an image; draw it; write it down. Share it with others. Pastors often have a group of lay people who read sermon texts with them; how about having a group of people for whom the conversation about the questions “What are we going through? What is the condition of our life together now?” remains ongoing? These kinds of questions and conversations might increase the possibility that the mutual interpretation shown in Nouwen's reading of the painting—our circumstances helping us notice aspects of the text, and what we notice in the text helping us read differently our circumstance—can happen.

In other words, we might linger in the art gallery of the text of Scripture.

My colleague, Angela Hancock, in a lecture at the Festival of Homiletics in 2024,²⁵ called for what she dubs “slow preaching,” drawing analogies to other slow movements. Such slow preaching would involve slow reading, which requires, as she says, “Attention to detail, deep listening, concentration, and self-awareness,” all qualities evinced in Nouwen’s reading of the *Prodigal Son*. To display what this could look like, she draws an analogy to what some museums are instituting: slow art days, during which visitors are encouraged to spend the day with just a few paintings. “You will linger at each painting, for example, noticing the figures in the shadows, the complexities that comprised each color. Once you’re done, you are invited to interact with others, maybe over a meal, sharing what you observed,” she says. And she makes the connection to slow preaching: “We might linger with the text like a painting, noticing the figures in the shadows, the complexities that comprise each color.” While this kind of lingering takes times, it’s a *quality* as much as it is a quantity, the quality we see in Nouwen’s own lingering.

I suspect that encouraging texts to enter our subconscious well before we preach them; inviting a congregation to linger with one text for several weeks—perhaps a whole season?—both as a text for preaching but also for prayerful contemplation between Sundays; and by being explicit about bringing the current circumstances and experiences of the congregation with us to the text so that the dance between lived experience and biblical word can take place are all ways we can allow Nouwen’s deep reading to shape our preaching. Ways we can allow scripture to hang in the gallery of our lives as we walk slowly through, trusting our experience, opening our hearts, and engaging our imaginations as we read these texts religiously. Ways we can eschew the rush of consumerism by returning again and again to these galleries, trusting more than all else the inexhaustible riches of what hangs there, pointing as they do to the infinite depths of God. Ways we might become all ear. ⊕

²⁵ Angela Hancock, “The Rest of the Story: Biblical Narrative and Slow Preaching,” Lecture, Festival of Homiletics, Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, PA, May 15, 2024. All quotations are taken from a manuscript of the lecture shared with me by the author on August 29, 2024.

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