

A name is so personal. Some dislike their name & others change it. Previously, Gabriel announced to Zechariah that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son & “call his name John”. Confusion occurred when the baby is named. In biblical time it was more than a label of identification. It was an expression of the nature of a person & the name was thought to reveal the person’s character. John the Baptist. John means “God is gracious”, David in Hebrew is “beloved”. A name change represented a change in character, i.e. Saul to Paul.

Question, “**Does society dictate our name or who we are?**” I’m reading a book that helps us answer. The book “**The Return of the Prodigal Son**” by renowned theologian & author Henry Nouwen, explores this idea. Nouwen places himself in roles as son, brother, the father & the implications of not just returning home, but of **leaving home**.

The son’s leaving is much more offensive act than it seems. The request for his inheritance means the son wants his father to die. More than any story in the Gospel, the parable of the Prodigal son expresses the **endlessness** of God’s Compassionate Love. He has tremendous love for us. God is our home. He rests (abides) in us and we rest in him. So leaving home is more than an event of time & place. Home is the center of being, where we can hear the voice that says, “**You are my Beloved—on you my favor rests**”. It’s the same voice Jesus heard; the same voice the Prophet Elijah heard standing on the mountain to meet God.

We also hear other voices which seem to be full of promise: “Go out & prove you’re worth something”. Be successful, powerful, popular. We question our own **goodness & doubt & our self-worth**, as voices suggest we’re not going to be loved w/o earning it thru effort & hard work, **conditional love**. Parents, friends, teachers, & mostly **mass media** that surround us say, “Show me you’re a good person, your worth”. When we listen to the world’s voice, we leave home & leave the **voice of unconditional love** to go to **distant lands** as the prodigal son does. Anger, resentment, jealousy, revenge, greed are obvious signs that we have left home/the Father. Our **faith & our knowledge that we are the Beloved** are fragile. We’re afraid of being disliked, blamed, passed over, or ignored. We move from the **Father’s House** & choose to live in a **distant land**, searching for recognition, worth, & love.

At the heart of this is the question, “**To whom do I belong, to God or to the World?**” We spend time & energy to stay afloat, a constant struggle resulting from the **mistaken idea** that it is the **World** that defines us. We give all the power to the **Voices of World** which is filled with **IFS**. The **world** says, “Yes, I love you **IF** you are good looking, **IF** you are intelligent, **IF** you are wealthy, **IF** you are educated, **IF** you produce & sell. There are endless **IFS** in the **World of Conditional Love**. We’re the Prodigal Son when we search for unconditional love, where it cannot be found, & return home, usually due to tragedy, illness or a problem.

The Father couldn’t compel his son to stay home. He couldn’t force his love on the Beloved. He had to let him go in freedom, even though he knew the pain it would cause both his son & himself. It was **love itself** that prevented the father from keeping his son home at all costs. It was **love itself** that allowed Fr. to let his son find his own life, even with the risk of losing it.

In this story, the **mystery of our life is revealed**. We are loved so much that we are left free to leave home. We continuously leave the blessing, but the Father is always looking for us in distance with outstretched arms to receive us back, to welcome our return until finally we trust God’s voice enough to stay home, live at our center, & claim our identity. We hear Him whisper again in our ear, “**You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests.**”