

GOD IS LIKE A LOVING FATHER

(6/20/10)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 15:1-24

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20)

This past week I was talking with Scott and Lynn Webster, whom I married ten years ago this past Christmas. I was telling them how much we enjoy having their son, Zachary, in our Sunday school, partially because Zachary keeps us entertained with his outspoken and often unique perspective on things. I didn't say it to them, but knowing Scott and Lynn as well as I do, I think I know why Zachary is turning out the way he is.

A couple of months ago as the coffee hour was drawing to a close, I found myself parked just outside the kitchen door waiting, as is my custom, for my wife. Zachary, who was waiting for his grandmother, Beverly, to finish cleaning up after the coffee hour, wandered outside and came over to where I was parked.

Zachary asked if I were waiting for Mrs. Sanderson. I said I was. I said that, just in case he hadn't noticed, this is what guys do: they wait for women. I told him, sort of man to man, that this is a bond he and I share with a lot of other men around the world.

I then offered the unsolicited but not totally unfounded observation that my wife is a master of the twenty-minute goodbye. When my wife and I are at a party (or a church coffee hour) and I have the feeling it is time to leave, I get my coat, express my thanks to the host and hostess, and get into the car. My wife not only goes around and says goodbye to each and every person, she summarizes her conversation with that person. I told Zachary that his grandmother is a little like that, but not quite to the extent of my wife, who is in a league of her own: they both like to socialize, to talk with other people. They just go around being friendly.

Then Zachary said, “Actually, God tells us that's what life is all about.”

I don't know where he got this. My first thought was that I have to check on what Barbara Crane and Karin Farmer are teaching our kids in Sunday school. My second thought was that if Zachary didn't get it from his parents, maybe he came up with this on his own. My third thought was that he might actually be right, and that I might even own my wife an apology for making fun of her when she is doing something that God wants

her to do. My fourth thought was the scariest of all: if Zachary is right, maybe this is something that God wants me to do as well!

But that isn't the point I want to make. We all know that "kids say the darndest things." I want to share an insight into parenting that Scott said he had read recently in Dale Carnegie's book *How To Make Friends and Influence People*, an insight he said he found helpful in his quest to be a better father. When he told it to me I was not only touched by it, I thought that it would be a great illustration for Father's Day.

At the end of the book Carnegie describes a scene where, at the end of a long day, a father stands in the door of his young son's bedroom and watches him sleep. The father realizes that when he criticizes his son for doing things wrong or not doing things better, the criticisms are grounded in his desire to have his son be or act older than he actually is. They arise from his inability to accept his son as he is at the age he is. This would have been a great illustration of one of the points I was trying to make last Sunday in my sermon about acting our age. It is also a great example of the theme of our scripture lesson this morning, the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is also called the Parable of the Lost Son. It appears only in the Gospel According to St. Luke, indicating that it was part of an oral or written tradition in Luke's church that was not available to Matthew or Mark at the time they wrote their gospels. If it had been available to Matthew and Mark I am sure they would have included it, for it is one of the most powerful of Jesus' parables. It contains the central element of Jesus' teaching, his revelation concerning the nature of God. In this parable, Jesus tells us that God is like a good, a loving father.

The parable begins, like so many fairy tales, with a father and his two sons. From the testimony of scripture, it appears that God often acted in what we would call a counter-cultural way, preferring the younger to the elder sibling. We find this in the story of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and Joseph in relation to his ten older brothers. In this parable Jesus depicts God in much the same way. The younger son, despite his follies, grows and matures spiritually through his journey more than the elder son who never leaves home.

The younger son is not a bad or evil person. He only takes what is rightfully his. He is simply not content to stay at home, live up to his father's expectations, and fulfill

his father's dreams. He wants to live his own life. He embarks upon a journey into a world he has not known or experienced. The younger son exemplifies the archetype of the hero, the one who travels to far off lands, engages in adventures, struggles, is wounded by life, and then returns to his people wiser and with more humility.

The younger son squanders his inheritance in dissolute living. He enjoys his experience of freedom, but he has not internalized the responsibility that attends adult life. He is not interested in working and earning a living. He is only too willing to live off an inheritance that was built by his father's labor. Before long the inheritance that served to insulate him from a central lesson about life has dwindled away.

The son's only crime is that he thinks and acts like a child. He does not know the importance of work. He does not know the pride that comes from earning his own way. He is not trying to make his own creative contribution to life. Sigmund Freud said that the two most important values in life are work and love. If we engage in meaningful, productive work, no matter how humble it may be, we are making a creative contribution to life. If we have someone we love and someone who loves us, we echo the heartbeat of the universe. Actually Freud didn't say this last part about echoing the heartbeat of the universe; I did.

If we have both of these, according to Freud, we are living a meaningful life. If we have only one, the foundation of our life and our identity becomes shaky. If we have neither, our life will be empty and neurotic. We will fail to experience the happiness that comes from living our life fully. Our soul, our deepest core, will not be shaped by the joys and struggles of both our work and our love. It will remain shallow and immature. Actually Freud didn't say this last part about how work and love shape our soul; I did.

Alfred Adler, one of Freud's early disciples who went on to found the school of Individual Psychology, added a third dimension to Freud's formulation. Adler tells us that what is important is love, work, and making a contribution to life, leaving the world a better place than how we found it. Carl Gustav Jung, one of Freud's early colleagues who separated from him to found the school of Analytic or Archetypal Psychology, added a fourth dimension to Freud's and Adler's formulation. Jung tells us that what is important is love, work, making a contribution to life, and our individuation, our inner journey, our spiritual journey. Now you know why I like Jung.

Alcoholics Anonymous tells us that sometimes we have to hit bottom before we decide to change. The younger son finally hits bottom. It is at the nadir, the lowest point of his life that he finally comes to his senses. The younger son is ashamed. He is living below the level where he should be living. From this realization arises an experience of genuine humility. From his harsh encounter with reality, the reality of life and his immature behavior, he undergoes a *metanoia*, a radical transformation.

The son returns to his father hat in hand. On the journey home he rehearses his reentry speech. He goes to his father as a penitent, but knowing that he has no right to expect his father's forgiveness. The parable is usually preached as a call for us, like the younger son, to repent, to confess our sins, and to return to God, for if we do so, we are assured that God will forgive us and restore us to a place of honor in his kingdom.

This isn't what happens in the parable. The father sees his son while the son is still far off. The father was waiting for his son. Every evening he stood on the porch with the boy's mother looking off into the distance. When the father would become discouraged and voice his doubt that their beloved son would return, the mother would restore his faith and his hope. "He will return. I know he will return. And when he does, we will be here waiting for him."

When the son's emaciated form appears on the distant horizon, the father knows him immediately. No distance of space or time can cheat the eyes of love. The father doesn't wait for the son to come to him; he immediately goes to the son. In fact, he runs to him. Filled with compassion, he puts his arms around his son and kisses him. The Greek word that is translated as "kissed" means to kiss tenderly. He kisses him tenderly because the boy is standing in rags, filled with shame.

The son begins the confession he has rehearsed on his long journey, how his selfishness and superficial values led him to squander the gifts that had been given to him by his father. The son tells his father that though he is asking for forgiveness, he has no right to expect forgiveness. He indicates his willingness to serve as a hired servant to prove to his father that he has learned his lesson. The son is willing to crawl.

The father doesn't care about the confession. He doesn't even listen to it. He doesn't accept the confession, nor does he offer forgiveness. What he offers to the son

is a love that is so strong and constant that it could never be damaged by the son's ill-advised and immature decisions.

The father would not spare his son the experience of making his own decisions and reaping the consequences of his actions, for this is how a child grows into an adult. In the Parable of the Lost Sheep the shepherd searches for the lost lamb. In the Parable of the Lost Coin the woman searches for the lost coin. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son the father does not search for the lost son. He simply stands and waits. The son must come to his senses and choose to return. Paradoxically, all of these stories are accurate depictions of God's relationship with us when we become lost. I tend to think that the first two, however, are more about us than about God.

When the son returns, there is no hesitation in the father. There is not a moment to be lost. The "best robe" which is used to cover the boy's rags was kept for only the most distinguished guest. Giving it bestowed the highest honor. The ring that is placed on the son's finger means that the son is still an heir. The sandals that the father has placed on his son's feet are a symbol of kinship, for only slaves went barefoot.

Remember the words of the old Negro spiritual,

*All God's children got shoes,
When I get to Heaven, I'm goin' to put on my shoes,
And walk all over God's heaven.*

This spiritual articulates the hope that in heaven black people will no longer be slaves.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is usually regarded as a teaching about repentance and forgiveness. To be sure, the son is repentant. The realization of his immaturity is an important part of his growth. But there is no evidence that the matter of forgiveness even crosses the father's mind. He kisses away his son's confession. The story is not about sin and salvation, about repentance and forgiveness; the story is about love. The Parable of the Prodigal Son should really be called the Parable of the Good or Loving Father.

The parable contains a lesson about the difference between death and life. When we are cut off from God and from our deepest values, we are spiritually dead. When we return to God in humility, we experience a love that not only accepts us but

actually runs out to greet us. Like a broken branch, we are grafted once again onto the vine, onto the tree of eternal life. Then we can once again begin to grow.

Jesus tells us that God is like a loving parent to us, a far better parent than our earthly, human parents could ever be. As human parents, if our children were to make a mess of their lives, we would be sad. As we know, we are often not able to prevent our children from making ill-advised choices and engaging in self-destructive activities, nor would we do so even if we could, for our children have to live their own lives and hopefully grow through their struggles. Our hope is that, like the younger son, our children will one day come to their senses and begin to live their lives in all their fullness.

If at some point our children were to return to us bowed and beaten down by the struggles of life, hardships which they may very well have brought upon themselves, would we offer them our forgiveness? I venture to say this would never cross our minds. What we would offer them is our acceptance, our support, and our love.

If our relationship with our children is not centered in the dynamic of offense and forgiveness, what makes us think that our relationship with God would be built around this focus? If God is the loving parent that Jesus insists he is, he wouldn't focus on our sin as the central dynamic in our relationship or the central element of our being. He would focus on the relationship itself, hoping that we can experience the constancy of his love, a love that pulls us back to the center as often as we go astray.

There has been too much emphasis on sin in the history of Christian theology. Theologies of sin and salvation have proposed various means by which our sin, that which separates us from God, can be forgiven or removed. We are told that our original sin can be washed away through baptism and that the stain of our sin can be washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. The assumption is that God is so deeply troubled or offended by our humanness, a humanness that he actually created, that he arranged to atone for it through the death of Jesus. None of these themes appears in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The parable is not about forgiveness but about love.

Dale Carnegie tells us that the secret of being a good father, the secret of being a good parent is to accept our child just where he/she is, and to love our child just as he/she is. To be sure, we need to guide our children, socialize them, and set their feet

on the path that God would have them walk. But we have no right to expect them to be perfect, never to spill their milk or make any of the much bigger messes that kids can make in and of their lives. If God doesn't place this expectation on us, we have no right to put this burden on the shoulders of our children.

God loves us just as much the father in the parable loves his sons. He loves us with a love that is constant and unswerving. This love cannot be diminished by anything we do or don't do in life. Even if we make a mess of our lives, the love is there. God is waiting on the porch for us, just as the father waited every evening for his son. He does not offer us forgiveness, but a joyous love. As Jesus tells us, all we have to do is turn around, open our arms, and receive it.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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PASTORAL PRAYER -- FATHER'S DAY

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we come before you in these moments of worship aware of your presence with us and within us. We come seeking to grow in our understanding of you, and also of ourselves. We come to deepen our relationship with you, and with our deeper selves. We come in need of healing, of guidance, and of strength to carry the burdens which life places on our shoulders. We come to you because Jesus told us that you are always there waiting for us.

O God, today, on Father's Day, we pray for our fathers. We remember our fathers, living or dead. We remember the ways in which they shaped our lives. We thank you for all the good they gave to us, and we pray for understanding, acceptance, and healing of the pain caused by their limitations.

O God, today, on Father's Day, we pray for those of us who are fathers. We do the best we can. We pray for understanding, illumination, and guidance to become the fathers you would have us be. Help us to constantly reexamine our values and priorities, how we spend our time and why. In these moments and in the days to come, remind us of our sacred trust.

O God, we need to remember what Jesus taught us, that you are like a father to us. You are not like a human father, wounded and imperfect. You are constantly, totally present to us as a creative, sustaining, guiding, healing power in us and in the world. You are like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son: calling us back as individuals and as a church to the sacredness of our calling.

In these moments of prayer, O God, we turn our thoughts from ourselves to those whom we know to be in special need: those members or friends of our church family whose names appear in our bulletin, members of our own families who are in need of prayer, and others whom we know to be going through difficult times. In these moments of silent prayer, we bring to mind and also bring before you all those whom we know to be in special need.

We ask this, our sanctuary prayer, and our many prayers both spoken and unspoken, in the spirit of our risen Lord. Amen.

FATHER'S DAY

When Mrs. John Bruce Dodd went to church on Mother's Day, she was troubled. Though mothers were extolled, fathers were not even mentioned.

For Mrs. Dodd, that just wouldn't do. She thought of her own father who sacrificed and worked hard to raise six children. Her dad, William Smart, was left with children aged 3 - 16 years when his wife, Mrs. Dodd's mother, died.

Mrs. Dodd believed that fathers deserved a special day, too. She also decided to do something about it.

In 1910, she spoke to the Spokane Ministerial Alliance to present her idea. On June 19 of that year, the first Father's Day was celebrated. Local newspapers publicized the new holiday, and stores featured gifts appropriate for fathers. Young men wore roses to church that day, a red rose if their father were living, and a white rose in memory of a deceased father.

Mrs. Dodd spent the day in and out of her horse-drawn carriage as she distributed gifts to shut-in fathers.

By the time Mrs. Dodd's father died in 1919, the day his daughter started in his honor was celebrated throughout the United States. By 1922, it was a nationwide observance in the United States and was widely celebrated in Canada.