

GOD IS LIKE A FATHER FATHER'S DAY

(6/19/11)

New Testament Lesson: Luke 15:1-32

“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)

The scripture lesson this morning, on Father's Day, is the Parable of the Prodigal Son, also called the Parable of the Lost Son and the Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother. The passage appears only in the Gospel According to St. Luke, indicating that it was part of a tradition in Luke's church that was not available to Matthew or Mark at the time they wrote their gospels. It appears among several passages concerning the theme of something that was lost and then is found, e.g., the lost sheep and the lost coin. This morning I would like us to reflect on this parable in terms of what has been lost in men, in fathers, and how this lost dimension of our life might be regained. I also want us to think about how our experience of our fathers has shaped our experience of God and our understanding of God.

We know that technically God is not a man. It is true that artists like Michelangelo pictured God as a muscular white man with a long beard sitting on a throne somewhere just above the clouds. We realize these works of art are not accurate pictures of God, but rather are the artist's anthropomorphic depiction of something that cannot be pictured. As Jesus tells the woman at the well, “God is a spirit.” God is not a man and God is not a woman, but in certain ways the spirit of God is like a man or like a woman.

Throughout history, people have experienced the spirit of God in many ways. In ancient times, people worshipped the sun, the giver of life. They experienced a feeling of awe when they heard thunder roar or saw lightning flash across the skies. Some anthropologists have suggested that the experience of thunder and lightning may be the source of people's fear of God or their sense of God's power.

Later people came to see God as a loving or devouring mother, then as a kindly or judgmental father. Throughout history, people have had many different experiences of God, and hence different concepts of God. We, too, have our own individual experience of God or our own picture of what we think God is like, but I hope we are not so arrogant that we think our little picture is the whole thing.

Jesus tells us that God is a spirit; God is not an object. God is not a thing located somewhere in the universe, just above the clouds or on another planet or in a magical place called heaven. People used to believe God dwelt just above the firmament, which was their picture of the universe. Heaven can't be just outside the limits of our universe, because we know our universe is expanding rapidly and has been for the past eighteen thousand million years. If heaven were just outside the universe, our poor souls would never be able to get there even if they traveled at the speed of light.

The ancient ideas about God and the partial pictures we have of God show us a part of God, an aspect of God, but each of them is limited. The God they describe is too small. Our pictures portray God as an object or a thing among other things in the universe, admittedly a very special thing, but a thing nevertheless. The God who created the entire universe and who constantly continues to create it, the God who created us and who constantly continues to create us, the God who brings truth and beauty and love and meaning to life is a lot bigger than any of our pictures or ideas.

You see, without thinking, I have just used an adjective to describe God, the adjective "big", which is the kind of word we generally use to describe things or people. We just don't have a language that can adequately describe God. The problem is, if we are to talk about God or learn about God or pray to God, we have to use words.

For tens of thousands of years, God was experienced as feminine. People realized this spirit of God created, gave birth to, and nourished life. This felt feminine to them. It was what women did. The ancients realized the spirit of God was in the earth,

that God was the spirit which pushed up the little blades of grass as well as the mighty mountains, and they very naturally saw Mother Earth as a part or aspect of God.

Human beings from ancient times felt God's presence, God's love and compassion, God's tenderness in ways that reminded them of their mother, at least if they had a good mother. During this period in history, people worshipped the feminine aspect or face of God. They saw this sacred spirit as a Great Goddess, and their paintings and statues of fertility goddesses represent their attempts to form an image of this creative, nurturing spirit.

There is nothing wrong with this feminine picture of God, this depiction of God as a Great Mother. You can say this is a pagan picture, but "pagan" just means nature. It is true that the ancients saw God in nature, but so what? We see God in nature. We see God in a beautiful sunset, in the mysteries of a star-lit night, in the gradual unfolding of the petals of a flower, in the mysterious and miraculous birth of a child. Darlene and I have been delighting this summer in watching a mother robin brood on her nest and, as of this past week, begin to feed her four newborn chicks in a plant that is right beside our back door. It has been absolutely amazing to watch. This picture of God in nature is not wrong or demonic or sinful or anti-Christian. It is just not the whole story.

Approximately four thousand years ago in our Judeo-Christian tradition, people began to experience God in a different way. They began to see another side of God, another face of God, another aspect of God's personality. They experienced the spirit of God as bringing structure to life, as giving human beings a moral code that made it possible for them to evolve as human beings. They experienced God as not only related to nature, but also to those human beings who entered into covenant with him. That's right: "him". The ancient Israelites experienced God's spirit as primarily masculine, as being like a stern, judgmental father who called them forth into a moral life and who was not happy when they deviated from the path.

In the Old Testament, we read of the many social and dietary laws that people believed came from God. There are still religious people who believe God doesn't want them to eat certain animals, such as pigs, which were associated with the earlier fertility goddesses, but most people nowadays don't believe God really cares what we eat or don't eat. In the New Testament, Jesus tells us that it is not what goes into our mouth that defiles us; it is what comes out of it. Jesus is telling us that God cares a lot more about what we say or don't say than whether we eat or don't eat.

Even though we may not observe all of the dietary and social laws of the Old Testament, as Christians we believe that God calls us to work unceasingly for peace and justice, that God cares for the poor and the oppressed, that God holds us accountable to a high moral standard. As human families evolved over thousands and thousands of years, this came to be the role that fathers played in families and in the cities. Mothers gave birth, fed, and nurtured. Mothers represented a constancy of forgiving love. Fathers, on the other hand, played a more distant and structured role. They presented the standards of the tribe to the children and made sure the children followed them. Fathers were more apt to be stern, angry, and punishing than mothers.

Because fathers were this way, children began to experience God this way, because children were taught that God is like a father. Children who saw their fathers as stern, distant, demanding, and punishing, came to see God this same way. Children who didn't know their fathers grew up feeling they really didn't know God. Children who experienced the violent drunken rages of their fathers grew up feeling they couldn't trust God. Children who were unable to have an honest conversation with their fathers grew up unable to pray.

Many of these children as adults want nothing to do with God, and have dropped out of the church. Unfortunately, by dropping out, they never come to realize that they have a distorted picture of God, a picture built around their experience of their wounded personal father, and they never get to experience the loving side of this Great Spirit.

The parables in the section of Luke that we read this morning tell us about something special, something precious that has been lost. I believe that as men and women developed along different lines in our culture, men lost something special. They lost touch with the feminine side of life, the feminine side of God, and the feminine side of themselves.

As a consequence, men began to have more and more difficulty relating to their wife and children on a feeling level. They lost a sense of the personal or spiritual dimension of religion. Men might function as the institutional leaders of the church, but they never prayed. They might be hard workers and supporters of the church, making sure it would be there for their children, but they had no sense of God's presence in their daily lives. Men lost something special. What's even worse is that for the most part, because in our culture men are strong and powerful, they don't even know what they've lost.

We men need to recapture the side of God that is presented in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We need to rediscover this loving father part of the Spirit of God, and we need to continually rediscover this part of ourselves. The father in the story of the prodigal son didn't behave like a father would have behaved in biblical times. Instead of being distant, stern, and judgmental, he was loving, welcoming, and forgiving. This is the feminine side of God that Jesus helped us discover or rediscover. This is what we men, we fathers, need to rediscover and empower within ourselves.

I think Jesus was trying to put us in touch with an androgynous God, a God whose spirit is both masculine and feminine. This is why I believe the God that Jesus described and which he incarnated was not the same as Yahweh, the Old Testament tribal warrior God. In the gospels, God is presented as being both masculine and feminine, searching for the lost son, the lost sheep, and the lost coin. I believe Jesus is calling us men to search for the lost son, the lost sheep, the lost coin, to rediscover a lost part of life, of God, and also of ourselves.

I have always wondered where the mother was in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. There is no mention of her in the story. Was she upset when her younger son took his inheritance and squandered it? Did she stand by the door of the house every evening, looking off over the hills, hoping he would return? The father in Jesus' time probably would have told her to come in. He would remind her that their son had chosen his path; he had made his bed and now he would have to lie in it. The father would have said there was no return. The mother would have said, "But he is our son. How can you close the door? If he comes to his senses, we have to take him back."

I think this parable is special because the father has the characteristics of both a father and a mother. There was no need for a mother in the story because the father acts like a mother. When the son comes crawling back, there is no coldness, no stern lecture. The father's response is not hard and legalistic, but gentle and loving. Jesus is telling us this is what God is like, that God is like both a father and a mother. And Jesus is telling us as men and as fathers, that this is how we should be as well.

Years ago, when my boys were young, I had a dream. In the dream, I was dressed in my three-piece suit. I was headed off to the airport. I was going to teach a course or give a workshop somewhere else in the country.

When I arrived at the airport, I discovered I had left my briefcase with all my notes back at the house. I raced back to get it. When I arrived, I discovered my son, Corey, who was about three years old, sitting alone on the curb by the side of the road. I said, "My God, how could I have forgotten my son?" I took him by the hand and we walked off across a field.

I have thought of this dream many times throughout the years, about what was symbolized by my son, about what I was leaving behind as I dressed up in my three-piece suit and traveled around the country giving courses and workshops, sometimes even on what it means to be a good father.

On a literal level, the dream could be telling me that I was neglecting Corey. On a more symbolic level, the child could symbolize my family. The dream could be telling me that because of my preoccupation with work, with the important work I am doing, I was neglecting my family. The dream could be telling me that I needed to spend more time with my wife and children. In the dream it was fortunate that I had forgotten my briefcase, for it was on going back that I discovered what I had lost.

The dream could also have been telling me something about myself. It could be telling me that I was so caught up with being an adult, dressed up in a three-piece suit and heading off to the airport, that I was neglecting the child-like part of me. It could be telling me that I need to rediscover and nurture my inner child, that I need to reenter the world that I left behind in early childhood by assuming the role of a parentified child within my family. If this were true, who would be better able to help me rediscover this part of myself than my children?

The dream could also have been saying something about my spiritual life. One of the most powerful symbols of God is a child. Think of all the feelings we have about the baby Jesus at Christmas time. God is like a new life within, a sacred child with a powerful transforming power. Jesus said, "Unless you become like a little child, you can not enter the kingdom of God." Isaiah said, "And a little child shall lead them." The dream could have been telling me that though I was running around doing important work in my counseling, my teaching, and my parish ministry, I was running the risk of losing the core element of my faith, the center of my own spirituality.

The dream may have been saying something about all these areas. It is unlikely that I would neglect my inner child without also neglecting my outer children, and unlikely that I forget my outer children without correspondingly forgetting an important part of my inner life. The dream may also not just be about the past. It may be just as true today. It is comforting to me that at least at the end of the dream I realized what I had done, and that I walked off with my son across the field.

This is the other half of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. A son can become lost, as in the parable, but a father can also become lost. A son can throw away what is precious, as in the parable, but a father can also throw away what is precious. A son can be forgiven and welcomed back, as in the parable, but a father can also be forgiven and welcomed back.

This is the kind of God we have, a God who is like a loving father to us as wayward children and to us as less than perfect fathers. Today, on Father's Day, let us celebrate the presence and faithfulness of this loving Father God, that God who forgives, who welcomes us back, and who, like Jesus, stands as a guide and role model for the fathers we should become.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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