

WHAT KIND OF FATHER . . . ? FATHER'S DAY

(06/18/17)

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)

Today, I hope you know, is Father's Day. It is a day to shower fathers with gifts. It is a day when fathers shouldn't have to cook the meals, do the dishes, or clean the house. Wait a minute—that's everyday! (Or at least it should be!)

Seriously, though, before my wife and all the other women here this morning walk out on me (and women reading or listening to this reflection on-line turn off their computers), I would like us to think about what it means to be a father. I am thinking of both the Judeo-Christian God who has traditionally been known, experienced, or conceptualized as a father, and also those of us who are human, struggling fathers. I suspect that what I have to say applies to mothers as well.

The scripture lesson this morning is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It is a parable about an errant child who wanders away, gets really lost, comes to his senses, and returns home. It is a parable about a father. It tells us something about what it means to be a good father. The father welcomes the child back with open arms. The parable also tells us something about God, about the kind of father that we experience in God.

Many years ago, in the mid 1960s, I was deeply moved by the popular song *Broomstick Cowboy* that was sung by Bobby Goldsboro. I don't know whether this song touched me because I was thinking of what it meant for me to grow up and become a man or whether it made me think about my future children. Several years later, in the mid 1970s, when I heard the folk-rock song *Cat's In The Cradle* by Harry Chapin, I had no doubt that it was speaking to me, that it was helping me reflect on the kind of father I was becoming and the lessons I was consciously or unconsciously teaching my children.

Since some of you may not remember these songs, I will come back to them some time in the future—perhaps on a future Father's Day. This morning, however, I would like to share a reflection by W. Livingston Larned entitled “Father Forgets.” It first appeared in *Reader's Digest* in 1927 and Dale Carnegie later quoted it in his book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Mr. Larned's reflection is as follows.

Listen, son: I am saying this as you lie asleep, one little paw crumpled under your cheek and the blond curls stickily wet on your damp forehead. I have stolen into your room alone. Just a few minutes ago, as I sat reading my paper in the library, a stifling wave of remorse swept over me. Guiltily I came to your bedside.

These are the things I was thinking, son: I had been cross to you. I scolded you as you were dressing for school because you gave your face merely a dab with a towel. I took you to task for not cleaning your shoes. I called out angrily when you threw some of your things on the floor.

At breakfast I found fault, too. You spilled things. You gulped down your food. You put your elbows on the table. You spread butter too thick on your bread. And as you started off to play and I made for my train, you turned and waved a hand and called, "Good-bye, Daddy!" and I frowned, and said in reply, "Hold your shoulders back!"

Then it began all over again in the late afternoon. As I came up the road I spied you, down on your knees, playing marbles. There were holes in your stockings. I humiliated you before your boy friends by marching you ahead of me to the house. Stockings were expensive—and if you had to buy them you would be more careful! Imagine that, son, from a father!

Do you remember, later, when I was reading in the library, how you came in, timidly, with a sort of hurt look in your eyes? When I glanced up over my paper, impatient at the interruption, you hesitated at the door. "What is it you want?" I snapped.

You said nothing, but ran across in one tempestuous plunge, and threw your arms around my neck and kissed me, and your small arms tightened with an affection that God had set blooming in your heart and which even neglect could not wither. And then you were gone, pattering up the stairs.

Well, son, it was shortly afterwards that my paper slipped from my hands and a terrible sickening fear came over me. What has habit been doing to me? The habit of finding fault, of reprimanding—this was my reward to you for being a boy. It was not that I did not love you; it was that I expected too much of youth. I was measuring you by the yardstick of my own years.

And there was so much that was good and fine and true in your character. The little heart of you was as big as the dawn itself over the wide hills. This was shown by your spontaneous impulse to rush in and kiss me good-night. Nothing else matters tonight, son. I have come to your bedside in the darkness, and I have knelt there, ashamed!

It is a feeble atonement; I know you would not understand these things if I told them to you during your waking hours. But tomorrow I will be a real daddy! I will chum with you, and suffer when you suffer, and laugh when you laugh. I will bite my tongue when impatient words come. I will keep saying as if it were a ritual: "He is nothing but a boy—a little boy!"

I am afraid I have visualized you as a man. Yet as I see you now, son, crumpled and weary in your cot, I see that you are still a baby. Yesterday you were in your mother's arms, your head on her shoulder. I have asked too much, too much.

This little reflection speaks to me. It is a prayer of confession for those of us who are fathers, for I dare say that many, if not most of us have been guilty of expecting or demanding too much of our children. We say it is for their own good that we correct them. We believe that criticism is part of the sacred task of socializing children, preparing them to function in our society. How will they ever know what they are doing wrong unless we tell them? And yet . . .

Is this really what it means to be a father? In our desire to have our children do well, to make something of themselves when they are adults, have we failed to accept, validate, and delight in their experience of childhood? Mr. Larned's reflection contrasts the innocence of childhood with the habitual unconsciousness, the unawareness, the cluelessness of adults. It reminds us of the importance of words. It reminds us of the importance of a look, a gentle touch, a tone of voice. It reminds us of the importance of a hug, a kiss, a presence, a relationship.

This reflection calls us to repent for the times that we were not the fathers we could have been to our children. It calls us to examine our motives. Alice Miller, in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, says that parents sometimes use their children as a narcissistic extension of themselves. We want our children to look good, act properly, do well in school, and be successful in life because it will reflect well on us. Their successes become our successes, and their failures become our failures. The bottom line, according to Alice Miller, is that it is all about the parent. This is not the same as love. And to be used this way is devastating to the child.

I doubt that any of us, either father or mother, can honestly say that this dynamic has had no role in our relationship with our children, shaping our expectations of them and the way we respond to their successes and failures. We want our children to reflect well on us, to give evidence of a good upbringing. However, with most of us there is also a genuine love. There is something, just as with the father in Mr. Larned's reflection, that calls us back to being the kind of parent that God wants us to be.

This is why it is so comforting when we read how the son dares to come to his father at the end of the day, interrupt his reading, run to him, throw his arms around him, hug him and kiss him good-night. Love is that powerful! It knows that, for all his faults, the father means well. And this kind of love forgives. The son forgives the father, even though the father is less than perfect. So the story is about children as well as parents.

Mr. Larned's reflection may also lead us to reflect on our relationship with our own father and how his style of parenting shaped our feelings about ourselves. We know that if we are constantly exposed to criticism, even well meaning criticism, we will internalize this criticism. We become overly critical of ourselves as adults. Nothing we do is ever good enough. We become crippled by low self-esteem, or we compensate for it by becoming an obnoxious know-it-all.

So on Father's Day we can ask ourselves the question: "What kind of father am I?" What kind of father was I to my children?" It can also lead us to reflect on what kind of father we had and how this experience shaped our own approach to fathering. Of course, we can also do this as mothers.

Finally, we need to remember that the Parable of the Prodigal Son is about God. Jesus tells us that God is like a father. God is like the father of the errant son.

Last week I mentioned the book *Your God Is Too Small* by the theologian J. B. Phillips. Phillips suggests that we all have certain pictures, understandings, or concepts of God, that all of these concepts are limited in their grasp of this great Mystery, and that consequently the God we know and worship is probably too small.

Phillips suggests that some of us have a conscious or unconscious picture of a God who is a stern judgmental father. This God is a perfectionist; he demands perfection from his children. He keeps track of every single mistake or indiscretion (he has a log of all our actions that will be opened and revealed to us at the time of the Last Judgment).

This God is always trying to straighten us out, always trying to "make us better," always trying to improve us, just as the father in Mr. Larned's reflection does to his son. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this understanding of God is the belief that we have to be perfect and pure to even enter into God's presence. This is why God decided to take all our sins, hang them on Jesus and then have Jesus killed. Jesus' sacrificial death makes us

pure enough to enter into God's presence, to enter into heaven—but only if we believe that this is the case.

Really? What kind of a Father is this? It is definitely not the picture of God that Jesus gives us in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: the picture of a good, a loving father.

Could it be that God is not overly concerned with constantly improving us, with making us better, with making us perfect? Could it be that this God delights in our messy humanity, just as a father should delight in a son who doesn't stand up straight, who puts his hands in his pockets, and who gets dirty when he is out playing with his chums? If this were true, it would take a crushing weight, a crushing burden off our shoulders. And it would help deepen our relationship with God by centering this relationship in love.

I believe that the experience of being loved by God just as we are would actually bear fruit in our ability to live a better, more loving life. It would help us become more accepting, more loving of others—just as they are. We would become better not because of God's constant criticisms of every thought, feeling, word and action that falls short of perfection, but by the realization that God loves us as we are. If God loves us as we are, then we should be able to love ourselves. And if we accept and love ourselves, we should be able to accept and love our brothers and sisters, our husband or wife, our parents or our children--just as they are.

If we are a father or a mother, Mr. Larned calls us to a searching and fearless examination of our relationship with our children, especially our underlying motives, the unconscious dynamics that shape our interactions and our relationship with our children. He also calls us as children to be as forgiving of our father and mother as the son was of his father in the vignette, to accept our very human, very fallible, and perhaps even broken parents, to extend to them the love that encompasses forgiveness.

If we can do this, we may discover that God is a much better father or mother than we could have ever imagined, that God loves us as we are with all our imperfections, and that, like the father of the prodigal son, God is waiting for us, waiting with open arms.

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