

Sunday June 16th, 2019
Father's Day

PRAYER: O God, we were far away from home. We had squandered our inheritance; we had sinned against you; we were not worthy to be called your children. But now, O God, we have come home. Where would we be but in our Father's house? Let your Spirit dwell within us, Lord, so that when you seek us, you shall find us where you would have us be.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: O God, you so freely pardon all who repent and turn unto you, now fulfill in every sincere heart your promise of redeeming grace. Forgive all our sins and those things we have failed to do, cleanse us from guilt and keep us walking in the ways of holiness and fruitfulness, that we may serve you all the days of our lives. This we pray through Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: To the children of faith, God has said in Isaiah 44:22, "I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like a mist: return to me, for I have redeemed you." Let us accept the acts of God on our behalf and return unto fullness of fellowship with him.

OFFERTORY SENTENCE: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation of shadow due to change." (James 1:17)

PASTORAL PRAYER: At a time when we were orphaned, when we had no home, when we wandered aimlessly through life, you came to us Dear God and offered us yourself. You claimed us as your own children. You challenged us to call you Father and in fact asked us to be more intimate than that and call you "Abba" or Daddy. We hear you offer Father, but we are hesitant. Our own earthly relationship with families has not been what it should be so we wonder what your family will be like. We have known strife, anger and even neglect, at the hands of those who claim they love us, so what shall you offer us. It is no mystery why when we need your presence in our lives, we would rather choose isolation. We fear the unknown, and we fear being hurt once again. But then we see Jesus, your only begotten Son, and Jesus seems so at peace when he talks with you. He seems so connected to you that the boundaries between the two of you blur and become indiscernible. We long for that same relationship. A relationship that transcends anything we have experienced on earth. We long for family, for your family.

Thank you for welcoming us and calling us sons and daughters. And we know, O God, that our relationship with you can transform all our relationships. We pray often for "your will to be done on earth as it is in heaven". Well we know that in heaven you are close and intimate with your son. Love flows openly and freely between you. That is your will, that love should define your relationship. How we long for such a relationship with our spouses, our children, our parents and our friends. How we long for honesty, mutual sharing and mutual support. We plead today, our Father, that our families and our relationships might reflect your relationship with Jesus. We pray that parents and children will experience love and affection. We pray that our homes will be protected from those things that seek to destroy the harmony and bonds that keep us together. Heal, we pray, the disease of selfishness that eats away at our relationships. Inspire us to seek better marriages, better friendships so that people will be drawn to our source of

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hope which is you.

Today being Father's Day, we celebrate first of all, that you are our Father and that you love each one of us as unique and special individuals. We also celebrate those men who are our earthly father's, grandfathers, uncles and other special men who guided and nurtured us along life's journey. We thank you for their selfless acts; especially their willingness to work day in and day out to supply our needs. We thank you for the offer of their time to play and share of themselves. We thank you for the simple pleasures of love that turn out to be the precious of all memories. Those shared times of laughter, those projects completed together, those moments when we were cheered on as we tried our best in our sports endeavors, or our musical events, or the pride in our report cards and accomplishments. Thank you for fathers, or for those who became fathers for us. May you bless the memories of those who have gone on to be with you, and may you bless those fathers who are still amongst us.

Finally, Dear God, we lift up in prayer those children, and those adults for whom no earthly father is available or who are separated for some reason from their fathers. Grant unto them someone who can act as a special friend to fulfill some of the father's role. Grant them a sense of peace that comes from knowing you are with our fathers wherever they may be. Grant hope to those fathers who struggle with issues of poor health, financial insecurity or no saving knowledge of Christ. We pray you might do wondrous things for our fathers, not only for their benefit, but more importantly for your glory.

Call to us today God out of your word and through your Spirit, as we continue to worship. We pray together in Christ's name, Amen.

BENEDICTION: We sang your praises, Lord, and as our voices mingled, our elders became youth, and our youths became elders. You are the one who embraces all generations, who makes of us together more that we can make of ourselves alone. Every day, we will bless you for this, O God, that the world may witness the faithfulness of your word and the graciousness of your work.

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Proverbs 15:1-10 and Luke 15:11-32

“Father Can Know Best.”

A son with a brand-new Masters of Business Administration degree came home to visit his parents, who owned a little “mom and pop” store. The young expert in business criticized his father for his inept business practices. “You keep your accounts receivable on a spindle, your accounts payable in a cigar box, and your cash in a drawer,” he complained. “How do you know your profit?” He asked.

“Son,” his father gently explained, “it’s like this. When I got off the boat, I owned nothing but the pants I had on. Now we have: a home, a car, a business—all paid for. Your sister is an art teacher, your brother a doctor, and you have an MBA. Add that all up, and subtract the pants, and there’s your profit.”

It is hard to go through life, with no appreciation from those you work with, but it is even worse to go unappreciated by those who are your own flesh and blood. Ask most men here today, and I am sure that besides the: ties, golf balls, and other gifts that mark Father’s Day, what they desire most is to know their hard work, sometimes in dreadful jobs, is appreciated by those they work to support.

So, I say, “Keep the ‘My Dad’s #1’ mugs and instead learn to respect the men who feel deeply the pain, when our children and even spouses, cast dispersions on the work and relationships that give us dignity and purpose.” These are unsettling times for families, and fathers and mothers. The makeup of families is changing, and what we might refer to as the traditional family, while still the norm statistically, it no longer accounts for the vast majority of households.

The most recent census data from Stat’s Canada from 2016 is the most comprehensive snapshot of our society that has ever been accumulated. There was a staggering 98% compliance rate in filling out the forms. The most common type of household in Canada right now is a single person one, at 28.2%. Households with couples and children is now only 26.5%. This change may be a reflection of our aging population.

The number of young adults aged 20-34 still living with mom and dad climbed 7%. 1/5 of all couples are now living common-law. The number of children living with one parent rose from 17.8% to 19.2%. In Ontario the number is 19%. By comparison in Nova Scotia it is 25%. The census also revealed the probability of a child ending up in a single parent home increases as the child grows. One major change since the 2001 census is that the number of children living just with their fathers is up 34.5%

Today, I am doing something I rarely do. I am returning to passage we visited not very long ago. (March 15th) In front of us, is one of Jesus’ most famous parables. Although we examined this passage recently, this time I want to refocus my approach to fatherhood and parenting. We all comprehend what the parable is about; God’s love for his lost sons and daughters, as well as a reprimand for the elder brothers representing the Pharisees, who cast judgment on the younger brothers.

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It might surprise you to learn that this parable has been misnamed for hundreds of years. Although the prodigal son is prominent in the story, the real focus, and point of this whole chapter, including the other parables in this chapter; is the elder brother. In verses 1-2, we read that the Pharisees were critical of Jesus reaching out to tax collectors and other notorious sinners. The Pharisees (the elder brothers) were angry that Jesus ate and shared with the “prodigal sons and daughters” of Israel.

There is something else that stands out in this parable that I want us to see today, being that it is Father's Day. I was thinking that the father, who represents God in the story, is really reflective of so many families. I sense from this parable that God understands the enormous pain, and disappointment, fathers and mothers, can experience from their children.

I am sure, many fathers in today's society, maybe even here today, can identify strongly with this poor father in the parable. Here was a man, who is obviously very wealthy. He provided for his two sons the very best that life afforded. They had: a good home, high quality food, fine clothes, and servants to do their bidding. I am sure that these two sons probably also had some education, perhaps by a hired tutor, at a time when few people had such an opportunity.

You would think that the two sons would be grateful, respectful, and love their father. However, as we read, the opposite is in fact the truth. Two sons, and neither of them showed any love and affection for their father. Their father was just a means to an end; namely to gain wealth. The two sons asked the same question as the Capital One ads; “what's in your wallet?” The younger son was a restless sort of fellow.

He perhaps felt trapped by his father's control. Maybe like the son in the story I shared earlier, he wondered how his father could have success with such outdated models of business.

At some point, as the son became a young man, he made a terrible decision. He decided he had to get away from his father. He desired to set out away from home, to find his own way in the world. He had a significant problem in realizing his ambition. He knew, and I am sure his older brother reminded him frequently; that according to the inheritance laws of his day, his elder brother would get most of the estate.

I am sure he considered his future without his father around, and he wondered what his options would be if his brother was in charge. Maybe he resented being the youngest, always the second banana to his older brother. His brother was the heir, and he was the spare. It is clear, from the parable, that the younger brother certainly didn't love his father very much. We know this because he hatches an unusual plan.

In a very calculated way, he figures that since a small portion of his father's estate is his, he would go and demand his share of the estate. “Give me what is mine” he demanded. What we often overlook here is that an inheritance is normally given when? Normally, such a transfer of assets occurs when someone dies.

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By asking for his share now, he is really saying that he wished his father were dead. Apparently, the only value the father had to the younger son, was the inheritance he would leave.

Selfish, of course he was! Uncaring? Perhaps? Clearly, there was no warmth in the son's heart for his father. His father was just simply a means to an end; his own selfish end. Amazingly, the father does what the son wants. He gives him his inheritance, and watches him depart for parts unknown. I have come to understand, that in Jewish culture and thinking, such an insult by the younger son would be thought of as unforgivable. In other words, this younger son was dead to his father.

As we know, the younger son wasted his wealth on loose living. Then a famine broke out upon the land where he was living, and the man was left without any resources. His friends, who had enjoyed his lavish spending, abandoned him, and he was left starving. Then, horrors of horrors, he takes a job feeding pigs; an unclean animal in Jewish law. Worse, he even begins to eat the food left out for the pigs. Eating pig food, among the pigs, is about as low as a Jewish man could go.

The bible says he finally came to his senses; returned home, and as we know, was greeted by his Father. Now I need to point something out to you that I find unsettling in this story. Notice if you will, what motivated the younger son to return. Nowhere, does it state he looked with fondness to his father, or found love for his father. Instead, we read that he was hungry and needed to fill his belly. I still see the younger son as selfish. But now his selfishness is out of desperation.

The value of his relationship with the father was a meal ticket. The parable says, he remembered that even his father's servants had plenty to eat. I don't read, that he remembered that his father loved him, or did many wonderful things for him. Maybe his heart changed, when he finally made his way home, but I still don't think the younger son fully appreciates what he had by the grace of his father.

The bible says when he saw the younger son approaching, the father was filled with love and compassion and he ran. The image Jesus paints is really quite startling. Imagine: a rich, dignified, older man, hiking up his robes and running towards his lost son, with those same robes flying high behind him. He didn't care how he looked to anyone else. He only wanted his son.

The father falls on his son, overwhelming him, and embraces him and kissing him. Tears were surely flowing. The father calls for a robe, a ring (sign of belonging and authority), sandals for his feet (no servant would wear sandals). They kill the fatted calf, and a great party begins to celebrate that the son who was dead, is now alive.

Enter stage left, the elder son. Does this son love his father any more than the younger son? Consider the evidence. The elder son was a dutiful son. He never refused any command given to him by his father (a clear reference to the Old Testament law). He worked hard for his father. He probably never talked back, or did anything rebellious.

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This son had every opportunity and every resource possible. Everything that was left in the father's estate was his, but did he truly love his father? The story tells us that the elder son did not understand his father's joy; joy at the younger son's return. Instead, he pouted outside the house, and grew angrier by the minute. The father even came out, away from the party, to urge the elder son to come in and celebrate. But he refused.

Instead, he revealed his true heart, didn't he? He started complaining that he had been a dutiful son all these years, doing whatever was asked of him, and never once had he been given even a goat to enjoy with his friends. The elder son was selfish, prideful, and unwilling to allow his father this moment of joy. We are left to wonder how this son, who had always lived at home, could not understand his father's heart.

The father even says that they were close. Surely, he had seen his father weeping, and maybe even praying for the younger son. He must have seen the heart ache over the insulting behavior in wishing the father dead. Maybe the elder son had also wished his father dead, but was afraid to voice aloud such a wish.

Two sons: one rebellious and selfish, the other dutiful and selfish; neither son appreciative of their father, nor overly affectionate to him. Neither son, at any point in the story, says they love their father, and neither certainly ever behaves like they do. It is nothing but heart ache all around, for the father in this story. But Jesus wanted us to see something else. Are you ready for this? It doesn't matter how much love the sons had for the father. That's right! It doesn't matter.

The point, of the story, is not the sons' love for the father, but the father's love for his sons. No matter what the sons: did, or how they behaved, or their attitude, or their lack of reciprocal love, the father loved them anyway. There was nothing, it seemed, that either the sons could do, even wishing their father dead; that could stop the father from loving his boys. Of course, we know Jesus is giving us a glimpse of God's love here.

The very definition of grace is that there is nothing we can do to make God love us less, or do to make God love us more. God's love is lavished upon us when we are the least deserving of that love. We are just like the younger son who returns, after living a terrible lifestyle; only to find the father pouring his love upon us. This is a beautiful picture of God. But is this not also a picture of earthly fathers, or maybe it should be.

Let's be honest here. In most, if not all our relationships, we judge the value of those relationships based on what we get out of them. The depth, and intensity of our love, is often affected by how we are treated by the other person. We expect, actually we demand, from our children, and sometimes others, a level of respect and even affection. And we know that sometimes, the harder we demand affection the less we receive.

Just think how small children feel, when you demand they go and give auntie a kiss. You cannot force affection. In families there is, I believe, a lot of heart ache from unspoken expectations. Parents believe, maybe sub-consciously, that children should automatically shower us with affection, never rebel, and serve us dutifully by doing their chores.

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Whether we realize it, or not, we struggle to love unconditionally. In thinking about this parable, and the nature of God's love, I realize that my calling as a father and your calling as parents, grandparents, and friends: is to love like God. To love, without any regard for a return on our love investment. Any response of affection, any token of appreciation (even an ugly tie), is really just a bonus. As parents, we love, because that is what God calls us to do, not because we get anything in return.

As the Apostle Paul states, "We love because he (meaning God in Christ) first loved us". As parents therefore, following the example we have in Christ, we are the ones that must first give love, first give affection, and first to let our children know that in this cold calculating world, there is at least one person who will love them no matter what. Our love to our children is never predicated on how we look to others.

All of us remember, some years ago, our then Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, stopping and shaking his young son's hand after dropping him off at school, and we all grimaced at the coldness of it. Maybe the Prime Minister was afraid of the cameras; afraid of looking "weak". Maybe it was his nature to be so formal even with his son, but it was still odd, wasn't it?

In the parable, the father ran with his robes hiked up. Something no distinguished Middle Eastern man would do. What matters, is not that the world might think us foolish, but that our children know we love them. From *Sports Illustrated*, the December 30th, 1996 edition is an account of an experience in the life of golfer Greg Norman. Nick-named the shark, Norman intimidated most other professional golfer with his ice-cold stoicism. Norman learned his hard nose tactics from his father.

Norman says, "I used to see my father, getting off a plane or something, and I'd want to hug him, but he'd only shake my hand." Kind of like what Harper did with his son. Commenting on his perceived aloofness, going into the 1996 Master's golf tournament, Norman said, "Nobody really knows me out here."

After leading the Master's event from the start, Norman blew a six-stroke lead in the last round to rival Nick Faldo. Rick Reilly writes, "Now Faldo made one last thrust into Norman's heart, with a fifteen-foot birdie putt on the seventy-second hole, the two of them came toward each other, Norman trying to smile, looking for a handshake and finding himself in the warmest embrace instead.

"As they held that hug, held it even as both of them cried, Norman changed just a little. 'I wasn't crying because I'd lost,' Norman said the next day. 'I've lost a lot of golf tournaments before. I'll lose a lot more. I cried because I'd never felt that from another man before. I've never had a hug like that in my life.'"

How many of us have never had a hug like that? How many of us long to know that whether we be prodigal sons and daughters who have ruined our lives, or whether we be the dutiful children who remained at home, there is someone named father, or mother, or friend who is ready to come rushing out to us?

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To greet us warmly despite looking foolish, and embrace us with such an all-encompassing, forgiving love.

If that is what we long for, then doesn't it make sense that our children long for that same love. If we want this world to be a better place, to have our children succeed in life and in relationships, then we had better love as God loves; because, if we don't do it for our children, no one else will.