

First Presbyterian Church

June 20, 2021

Bruce Pitman

Our Father's Love

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 15:11-32

Happy Father's Day!

A few days ago, I was in a Target store in north Spokane and saw a shelf of Father's Day Gifts. The kind of gifts that shout..."buy me if you can't come up with a better idea". There were coffee mugs, tee shirts and hats that had the slogans...Number ONE Dad...Best Dad in the World...Super Dad. There were even plastic trophies where you could write your own slogan onto their base and then give the trophy that you personalized with a sharpie. Best Dad Ever! Since the market has fallen out of the ugly/unwanted tie gifts maybe a coffee cup or trophy is the next best thing.

I am sorry if I have made fun of your favorite coffee mug...I am very aware that I might get one later today and it WILL become my favorite.

This is supposed to be a day when we celebrate fathers, grandfathers, uncles, or other men who have been important in shaping our lives....it is also a day to pray that we are being meaningful forces in the lives of our children, grandchildren or children who do not have fathers. Sometimes coaches, scoutmasters, and teachers are those substitute father figures. We find ourselves doing the same on Mother's Day. It is also may be a time of complex feelings if you were raised by parents who struggled to be nurturing or had their own mental health or addiction struggles. Perhaps you experienced a very damaged family and these holidays become a day of reflection and maybe reconciliation. We are not a perfect people...we often know that our parents were not perfect and that we are shaped by those relationships. We want to live in a world of perfect families and yet many are not...and each family has its own story.

My Fathers' Day is generally more reflection and reconciliation with my father...and enjoying phone calls and gift cards from my kids and grandkids.

I take comfort in knowing that many of the bigger faith stories are told about families who are not perfect...who are flawed. AND I am also uplifted by stories that assure me about God's love and tell me that I am a child of God and that I am an "heir to the kingdom".

Many enduring stories in the Bible are told about very flawed and very dysfunctional families. Sometimes, it seems like the takeaway from some of the stories is... DON'T BE LIKE THEM... but most of the time there are more profound truths that lay the foundation for our faith. Abraham, Sarah. Hagar Ishmael and Isaac, Isaac, Esau, and Jacob. Joseph and his jealous brothers...and many others. The competition for parental love and inheritance led to epic tragedies AND powerful stories of forgiveness and reconciliation. Maybe these stories were there to partly make us feel better about our own families.

In the other direction, the Bible gives us hints about a perfect father-son relationship describes the one Jesus and his heavenly Father. It invites us to claim a personal relationship with God as a source

of our strength and hope. Jesus and God each embrace this powerful and loving relationship with one another, and it is a model that we can claim. At Jesus' baptism God declares that THIS IS MY SON WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED...and Jesus regularly goes into prayerful isolation and spends time with God. Jesus becomes intimate with God ...often calling him Abba Father...which was term of close endearment when Jesus goes to God seeking to do his will in the most difficult of circumstances. Jesus even asks God to spare him the pain and torture of the cross. And on it continues as Jesus prays to his father for those who are crucifying him.

One narrative creates a model of faith paved with love and the other hard stories describe the messy world in which we might be living.

So I would like to spend a few minutes focusing on one of the most Father's Day parables in the New Testament.

The story of the Prodigal Son begs to be considered on Father's Day. The parable of the prodigal son has also been called the story of the Loving Father or the Forgiving Father...I would call it the PERFECT PARENTAL PARABLE. Jesus was a great teacher/storyteller, and this parable continues to carry great weight today...if you have had a parent...or if you are a parent or a grandparent. This story has power because it hits us where we live and where we have lived. It is a story where we might have been each of the main characters at some point in time...we may have been the wayward child, the loving parent and even perhaps the jealous brother...or we may have been a very judgmental neighbor.

Most of this story is fairly simple on the surface. A young brother comes to his father and says...I want out. I want out of this family, and I want to go have fun. Dad, I know that when you die, I will receive an inheritance. You are not dead yet...and I don't want to wait that long. I want this portion that will eventually be mine...now. There is nothing in the text about how his father reacted to this request...except that his father said YES. Then, the young man left for a season of profligate living. Everyone knew that this would only lead to trouble upon troubles. SO, the wayward son eventually runs out of money and is starving and in desperation seeks work from a farmer tending pigs and hoping to eat some of their food. At his lowest moment, he has a flash of desperation/humiliation and returns to his father and begs for forgiveness and for a job as a common laborer. His father is over come with joy that his son has returned and creates a welcome feast and gives him full membership back into the family. He has fresh clothes, a ring with the family crest and a fresh start.

These are the familiar parts of the story and here are a few parts of this story that I would like to have you consider; The first issue is that when the son asked the father for his inheritance the father said YES. The request was a most painful dilemma for the father.

He could have said NO. The father obviously did not want to give him the money because it meant that his son was rejecting him and his family. The request meant that the relationship was fundamentally broken. The father also could anticipate that he would probably never see his son again and that his son would likely suffer harm. This was horrible dilemma for the father. ...AND If the father said yes...it would bring shame and scandal onto the family. The customs and rules about family wealth were clearly defined and having a child reject the family and the father were a tragedy. The son's request was essentially at the level of saying...I wish that you were dead. If the father said yes he would also be judged to be weak by the community and that he the father must have failed in some way.

Another part of the dilemma was that IF the father had said NO....I won't give you the money...the son would have been angry and perhaps would have run away anyway. OR his son may have stayed and caused significant problems for everyone. The father knew that he could not make him love the father or others by forcing him to stay. The father could not restore the relationship by making him stay.

BUT HIS FATHER SAID YES, (As a parent, I often felt that saying yes was much harder than simply saying no. Saying yes, meant there are risks and I hope that you will make good decisions. and I then I would pray. Remember how it felt when your child first drove out the driveway with the car by themselves! ) SO HE GAVE HIS SON THE GIFT OF FREE WILL.

Another part of the story that seems to get overshadowed is that the wayward son really did receive consequences for his selfish actions. Yes, the father welcomed him back with love and joy, but the father allowed there to be consequences, the son was starving, he ate and lived with the pigs. In Jewish culture, pigs were some of most reviled animals. He suffered great humiliation and sought forgiveness. Perhaps his father could have sent servants to try to keep his son safe from the worst consequences of his bad judgement. The father let his son suffer the natural consequences of his poor judgement and selfish actions.

SIN HAS CONSEQUENCES, while the wayward son was welcomed back, he still suffered.

The major thrust of the parable is obviously the father's overwhelming joyful response to knowing that his son had returned. The father didn't make his welcome conditional. He didn't consider making his son return as a laborer. The son had suffered consequences and asked for forgiveness. The family was whole again, even though not all family members were feeling the love. LOVE overcame anger. LOVE overcame family scandal. LOVE wins. Love and GRACE were not earned, but given anyway. The welcome banquet, the fine clothes and shoes were not earned or expected. LOVE and AMAZING GRACE was given in such fullness that the older brother, and the judging neighbors felt that the wayward son did not get what he really deserved, but his father's love was freely given, even though it was not understood by others.

OUR Heavenly Father has given us free will and does not protect us from the consequences of our decisions. Sin does have consequences, still He showers us with grace and love which we cannot earn or buy. It is hard to believe that God's grace and love is given to each of us.

I have a dear friend who is a deeply devoted Christian who sadly lives his life believing that he is too damaged to be forgiven. He feels like he has hurt so many people, and fallen so far of the mark that he does not DESERVE GOD's love, despite his profession of faith. When he gets to heaven, I am certain that he will be shocked with the lavish welcome banquet and homecoming. He will be welcomed with new clothes, the family ring, and more love than he can imagine. He is in for a great surprise!

HIS LOVE is there for us, and we can't earn it. God's Grace.

Several years ago we had a faithful member of our congregation who would tease about big issues. Joe Taber was always doing projects at FPC and the Campus Christian Center. I would often greet Joe with the same question, "What are you up to?". He would always say, I am earning God Points, then I would ask, how many are you earning today and he would give me a number. Then I would say..."Joe, I don't think that it works that way". He would say,"you are right, but I am not taking any chances".

Finally I would like to share a passage from Paul's message to Titus trying to describe the nature of our fathers love for us. This is a translation by Eugene Peterson in the message.

"He said It wasn't long ago that we ourselves were stupid and stubborn, dupes of sin, ordered every which way by our glands, going around with a chip on our shoulder, hated and hating back, But when God, our kind and loving father stepped in, he saved us from all that. It was his doing; we have nothing to do with it. He gave us a good bath, and we came out of it new people, washed inside and out by the Holy Spirit. Our Savior poured out life so generously. God's gift has restored our relationship with Him and has given us back our lives. And there is more life to come...an eternity of life! You can count on this!"

OUR HEAVENLY FATHER HAS GIVEN US AMAZING GRACE.

OUR HEAVENLY FATHER LOVES US ALREADY. HE GIVES US FREE WILL and even though there are consequences to our actions, he will welcome us back to the family. He will host a banquet and give us new clothes. He knows that he cannot force us to stay in the family...he can't bribe us with an inheritance, but he can redeem us with his love. LOVE overcomes. Our heavenly Father cannot require that we love him, and does not force us to be part of HIS family but he welcomes us with joy when we do.

On this Father's Day, know that our heavenly father gave us his most precious gift when he gave his only son.

AMEN.