

June 21, 2020

Father's Day

Luke 15: 11-32

Prayer: Our heavenly Father, hear our prayer on this day set aside to honor our earthly fathers. Help these fathers in our midst to be more like you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Best of ... Father's Day

There is a portrait that hung in my grandparents' house for decades. It was from Olan Mills, a studio that took every Greenville child's photograph in the 1950s.

This picture shows me at about 18 months old. My mother had put me in a dress that tied in the back. She had curled a single blond curl on top of my head. I was all chubby because "healthy" babies back then were porked up.

But instead of holding a baby chick or a children's book or an Easter basket, in this portrait I am holding a man's worn leather wallet.

Well, you know how when you grow up with something, you assume it's normal. And I saw that portrait every day of my life.

But finally one day in my 20s, it hit me how odd it was. Even for my family. So I asked my dad: "Why would you dress me up and curl my hair, then pose me with an old cracked brown wallet?"

And my dad said, "Oh, you were crying in the studio, and wouldn't stop until I gave you my wallet. It's been that way ever since."

Well, let me just say that's not entirely true. But many years later, when Vince and I built our first house, my mom and dad purchased our mortgage. They did it so they could give us a better interest rate.

I warned him. "Dad, you realize if you foreclose, Vince and I and three children and the dog will move in with you?"

Best mortgage insurance ever.

He was still giving me his wallet.

Those of us with the good fortune to be born into a loving and stable family with at least a half-full wallet, have a leg up in the world.

We have run JustFaith classes here to learn about all the ways that *doesn't* happen – racial prejudice, generational poverty, gender inequality, being born in the Third World. Incidents such as the mob destruction of Tulsa's Black Wall Street in 1921.

Many of the protests that erupted over police killings of black citizens are reaching back to touch on this issue of unequal opportunity, of skewed advantages from the day we are born.

Just this week, *The Greenville News* ran a front-page story about historically black colleges that have given opportunities to first-in-their-family black students. Those schools are now threatened with economic collapse because of COVID-19.

Those of us whose tuition was paid from our father's wallets can scarcely relate.

“If I have seen further than others,” wrote Sir Isaac Newton, “it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

I'm no Isaac Newton, but I benefited from standing on my parents' shoulders, from having access to my dad's wallet.

But good parenting goes far beyond economic security.

Ten years ago on Father's Day, I preached about my dad for the first time. It would turn out to be his last Father's Day, for he died the very next month.

I had resisted talking about him earlier for a very specific reason – I thought he was the world's greatest father, and I was pastor to many parishioners with absent fathers. With abusive fathers. With addicted fathers.

But two weeks before that Father's Day in 2010, something happened at Triune that made me change my mind. And so I told how as a young man, my dad hitchhiked to Myrtle Beach every summer to work at the Pavilion. He swept floors and did whatever he had to do so he could stay at the beach all summer.

No one who knew him was surprised when he joined the Army paratroopers as soon as he turned 18 – as World War II was winding down. He went in to tell his father, and all my granddad said was, “Boy, I hope you have good insurance.”

He was a great dad for daughters, because he told my sister and me we could be anything we wanted to be. He told us that while there was danger in the world, we couldn’t let it influence our lives. Living in fear, being afraid, was not an option.

When I was 14, some girls invited me to go to the beach the first week after school ended. I was a little nervous because they were a year older than me, and I only knew one of them well. I kind of wanted my dad to say I was too young to go, as most dads would have.

But my dad said, “Now you’re not afraid, are you?”

So, naturally, I had to go to prove him wrong.

When it snowed, he’d take my brother and me out in the car, and inevitably we’d get stranded and have to hitchhike home. Or he’d pull

us on a sled behind his Volkswagen beetle, sticking his head out the window to yell, “Make sure you keep your feet on the bumper so you don’t slide under the car!”

He was something of a wild man.

We had a community pool, and every summer he would insist upon making one appearance early on, and performing a back flip off the diving board. Water would go up his nose, and he’d spend the rest of the summer complaining that we’d caused his sinus infection.

Later in the season, we would go to the beach with four other families. There would be 10 adults and 12 kids sharing a huge beach house. The other kids always wanted *my* dad to take them to the carnival, because on the way home, he’d stop by a farmer’s field and put them out to steal watermelons.

The boys would come running into the house with watermelons for supper. They’d be yelling, “Hewer made us do it! He drove the getaway car!”

Watermelon thievery notwithstanding, my father taught me that people are basically decent, and that you can't let fear of a few bad ones dictate how you live.

That *something* that happened at Triune two weeks before Father's Day had to do with that teaching.

As we were leaving worship on that day in early June, a man approached me on the street. His name was Ken, and he had arrived in Greenville on a bus the night before – as many of our guests do. He had been traveling for days, all the way from California.

He was trying to locate a daughter in South Carolina, but he had lost her phone number. Greenville was the only city in South Carolina he'd ever heard of, so he came here.

All he was asking was if he could use our return address to write to a relative in California to get her phone number. I said that would be fine, but that might take a week or more. Surely we could do better than that.

So we started talking and he mentioned that his daughter Jessica used Facebook. So we went up to my office, typed in Facebook and her name, and she popped right up. Ken saw her picture and started crying.

“That’s her!” he said. “That’s my Jess!”

We wrote a note on her Facebook page, asking her to call the church.

We then tried to find a shelter bed for Ken to spend the night, but we couldn’t get him in the Salvation Army or the Rescue Mission. So we gave him some blankets, and he slept outside.

The next day, I got in early, and Ken was waiting for me. We went to my office, and sure enough, there was a red message light on my phone. It was Jess in Rock Hill, all excited to know her dad was here. We called her back, and she and her two little boys drove to pick Ken up.

As we waited for her, he said, “You know, I’ve been around Christians all my life. But I’ve never seen Christianity in action the way it is here.”

I thanked him, but said frankly, I’d been embarrassed that we couldn’t get him into a shelter for the night.

That didn’t bother him. “You know what impressed me most?” he said. “That you took me up to your office to contact Jess on the computer.”

I was kind of astounded, because I didn’t think that was a big deal.

But he said, “Oh, no. I expected you to leave me downstairs and tell me you’d look into it. But to take me to your office showed you trusted me, that you believed me.”

What a simple thing. I was able to help *this* dad connect with his daughter, because *my* dad taught me not to fear people.

In Judaism and Christianity, the image of God as Father is pervasive. For those of us with good fathers, it’s a good image, a

positive image. It makes sense to have a heavenly father who loves us in the way our watermelon-stealing fathers do here on earth.

For those of us with bad fathers, the image of God as Father can be an obstacle to belief, or at least an obstacle to belief in a loving God.

If you are a man whose father disappeared, do you see God as distant and uncaring?

If you are a woman who has been abused by a father, do you see God as cruel and tyrannical?

When things have gone so terribly wrong in our human relationships, the parental metaphor can do more harm than good.

In our Scripture passage for today, we're going to look at the Bible's *best* depiction of God as earthly father. It's in chapter 15 of the gospel of Luke. Chapter 15 consists entirely of a three-part parable about losing and finding. First a sheep. Then a coin. Then a son.

It's a long story, so I'll tell the first part.

A man had two sons. The younger asked for his inheritance, which was an insulting proposition in that culture. Nonetheless, the father gave him his portion.

The younger son traveled to a distant country and spent his inheritance in dissolute living. Then, penniless and starving, he hired himself out to a pig farmer.

After awhile, he realized his father's servants ate better than he was eating, so he decided to return home and offer himself as a servant to his father. Starting with Luke 15, verse 20:

²⁰So he set off and went to his father. 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. ²¹Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

²²But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

25 ‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on.

²⁷He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.”

²⁸Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.

²⁹But he answered his father, “Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours

came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

³¹Then the father said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.” ’

You may have heard this passage referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Our pew Bible calls it the Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother, which more correctly recognizes the importance of both sons.

But I think the best scholarship calls it the Parable of the Forgiving Father. For truly, that’s where the emphasis should be.

Now you can read and preach this story in hundreds and thousands of ways, picking out a different detail each time. It is rich, rich, rich in

storytelling. But all I want us to look at today is the picture of this father.

For this father is truly a father worthy of Father's Day.

For starters, dignified patriarchs in ancient Israel did not run. That would be uncouth. It would be buffoonish.

But that is exactly what this father does when confronted with the son who's already made a fool of him by taking his inheritance and running off.

“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.”

The father is so eager to welcome and forgive his son that he seems to hardly hear his apology. **“He was lost and is found!”** That's the theme Luke is trying to convey.

We serve a father-God who will run and bend and render himself buffoonish to save us. We serve a father-God who will sacrifice himself to save us.

The parable ends with the dutiful son complaining over the unfair treatment of his younger brother. And of course, the treatment is unfair, just as life is.

But the father remains the same. *The father remains the same.*

“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”

He loves the older brother. His inheritance will be shared with the older brother.

But the one thing he will not do for the older brother ... is banish the younger brother. I think the ugliest trait we in the church have is the older brother's arrogance that we alone are worthy of God's love.

“We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

Last week, I mentioned Jesus' first sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. His neighbors got so mad at his sermon about people they'd like to banish that they tried to kill him. This is the same theme, different example.

The older brother does not like it one bit that his father loves his no-account brother. The good scribes and Pharisees do not like it one bit that their heavenly father loves tax collectors and sinners.

And we can fill in the blank about whom we don't want our father to love. What's the saying? *We know we are making God in our image when his enemies' list is the same as ours.*

But the truth is, we don't get to decide. Our God can love anyone he chooses, reach anyone he chooses, save anyone he chooses.

Regardless of skin color or nationality, sexual orientation or gender identity. Regardless of whether their wallets are full or empty.

My parents had six grandchildren. In the middle of the pack were two cousins born eight days apart – my younger daughter, Madison, and

my sister's daughter, Samantha. These two were big buddies and loved to spend the night together at their grandparents' house.

When they did, my dad would take them for breakfast at Denny's. If you knew these three, they could eat some breakfast: Eggs and sausage and biscuits and pancakes.

When the waitress brought the bill, my dad would always, always, always, pull out his worn brown wallet – probably the same one from the 1956 picture. And he'd say, "Oh, no, I don't have any money! Can the girls wash dishes?"

Madison said no matter how many times he pulled it, she and Sam fell for it. They were sure they were going to jail as pancake thieves.

But the truth was ... that wallet was never empty.

Those of us with such a legacy must work to ensure that every father, every child, has the opportunity to fill such a wallet.

Amen.