

Two Fathers – Two Sons
(1 Samuel 15:34-16:13, Luke 15:21-32)

Today is Fathers' Day--a day to honor fathers for their sacrifices of love. What a wonderful thing to do, and yet the minute we praise fathers and place them on a pedestal; the minute we lift them up as role models for our young people, we run headlong into the reality that fathers are flawed and broken – even cruel and abusive. Our scripture readings today tell us about two very different fathers. One father is King David, chosen by God to be leader of Israel because of his good heart – and yet David's love for his son Absalom was blind sighted and obsessive, and David's own personal moral behavior a disgrace. The other father is the Prodigal Father from Luke, a model of God's unconditional love for his children. King David was undoubtedly the most skillful king in the history of the Israelites. But when it came to being a father, he crashed. He doted on his son, Absalom, loved him with an obsessive and permissive love and almost let him get away with murder. His son Absalom gathered together an army of men to capture the throne. They occupied Jerusalem. His father, tipped off in advance, fled through the night across the brook Kidron. The next day a battle ensued and Absalom, King David's favorite son, was killed. When King David heard of it he became angry and disconsolate, sobbing and weeping on a day when his followers had won the victory and saved him from death. Joab, the commander of his army had to rebuke David, because the king cared more about his son, who had tried to kill him and all of his followers, than he did about the men who saved his life. The Bible is a rogue's gallery of people who were lousy parents. Lot, after God saved him from destruction, repaid God by getting drunk and committing incest with his daughters. Noah, righteous man of faith who trusted God and built an ark while everyone else laughed, got drunk one night. Two of his sons ignored it, but Ham took notice. As a result Noah cursed him. No wonder people grow up in life with very different experiences of what family life is like. How different, then, are the experiences that we have with our own fathers. For most, Fathers day is truly a celebration of a wonderful relationship. But for others the day must be terribly difficult. One of my favorite authors is Frederick Buechner. When Frederick was a ten years old, his father committed suicide. Some children had fathers who were absent, abusive, controlling or cold. Today is Fathers' Day. How different that Day can feel. It depends upon the family you grew up in.

One of the myths of parenthood is that a parent can control how his children turn out. The myth dictates that obedient children are the fruit of good parents, but disrespectful and rebellious children who wander aimlessly in life and get in trouble with the law can lay the blame at the feet of parents who didn't bring them up right. "What? Your child got arrested—well, I always knew that you were a bad parent." What then are we to make of this parable in which one son comes back and joins the party while the other stays outside pouting like a three year old? Luke, chapter 15, is often referred to as the parable of the prodigal son. Bad title! The parable is not about one son, but about two. It is about the careless, spendthrift son who is lost to all the world until, destitute and starving, he returns home and is found. It is also about the older brother who comes home to find out that his father has thrown a party for this long lost brother and stays outside pouting. Rowland Croucher in a Father's Day Sermon confessed,

“We have had four children, all now adult. They were great kids. I rarely had to tell any of them twice to do or not do something. But two of them (the younger two) are 'in the faith'. I don't know about the older two. [We'll talk more about that next Saturday at the Parenting Seminar].” In the same family there are two children. One grows up to lead a life praised by everyone who knows him. The other is in and out of trouble all his life and finally dies destitute and alone from cirrhosis of the liver from a life of alcohol and drugs. The younger son comes home, grateful, changed for a lifetime of glad commitment to family and work. The older one stays outside, mad at his father and at the world. No one's love is greater than God's love for his children, yet despite that love many turn away and never come in out of the cold. How different fathers can be. How different children can be. Abusive parents can end up with wonderful children. Wonderful parents can have messed up kids.

Most fathers love their children with a powerful love and sacrifice themselves for their children. Daphne Burt shares the stories of the kinds of sacrifices fathers make for their children. (From a sermon preached by Pastor Daphne Burt at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel on June 16, 2002)

One father works for a small, struggling firm. He hates his job. He went to law school because he wanted to make a difference - he wanted to help those who were wrongfully accused - he wanted to change laws that were unjust. But then he got married, and his first child was born with special needs, and he simply couldn't pay the bills on the salary of a public defender. So he goes to work every day and does a lot of paper work and makes enough money to support his wife and family. Sometimes he thinks about changing jobs, but it always comes around to this - he is providing for his family, and that makes it worth it.

One father has a teenaged daughter who hates his guts. He discovered that she was doing drugs and he and his wife have been laying down the law with grim determination ever since. Every time he has to tell his daughter that she can't do something - can't talk on the phone, can't use the internet, can't go out with her friends - he knows that he will have to face his daughter's wrath. Some of you may know that there is nothing quite so awe-inspiring as a teenager daughter's anger. She calls him names, or she refuses to talk to him at all; she blames him for everything that is wrong in her life and often tells him that she hates him.

It breaks his heart.

Every time he has to lay down the law or make a rule he knows that he is risking losing the affections of this fiery tempest he still thinks of as his little girl. But he also knows that part of being a parent is loving your child enough to say “No.” And that there are things far worse than having your 15 year-old- daughter hate you (although if you asked him right about now, he probably couldn't think of anything).

And there are others:

** One works as a migrant worker and sends the money to his family in Nicaragua whom he hasn't seen in two years*

** Another is a police officer, and puts his life on the line every day so that you and I can sleep in safety*

** Another drove straight through the night so that he could be with his family on Father's Day - knowing that it means the world to them, even though he'd have rather slept in a hotel and gotten home the next day*

** Another put his career on hold to live near his mother who is grieving the sudden death of her husband, his father*

God bless all the fathers, all the caregivers who work so hard to nurture the children in their care.

We can't choose our fathers. They come with this package we call life. For the most part, we don't choose our children either. They come, little packages not much bigger than a pot roast, all wet and red. They take their first breath and make an indelible mark on our lives. We can't control how they turn out--Nobel Prize winner, lifer in prison or somewhere in between. That doesn't mean that parenting makes no difference. My guess is that all the love in the world may not make a rebellious child come home. But abuse and neglect can leave marks on a life that last forever. And so God has shown us the love that we by his grace can show to those in our care. God has shown us the kind of love that is like rich soil in which plants can thrive. It is an unconditional love that nurtures and guides. It is a love and cares enough to set limits. A love that is demonstrated first in consistent and responsible living. It is a love that finally is willing to let go. I hope on this Fathers' Day that all whose experience with Father has been broken and hurtful, will experience the healing of God's powerful love. I hope that those who remember and will always think of their father with affection and gratitude will find a way to express that gratitude to them. I hope they will say, "Thank you!" to God of what God has given. And I hope that all of us will encounter and be healed by God's amazing love.