

Sermon Text for June 21, 2020

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 22:1-8, Luke 15:11-24

“A long embrace”

As we have been saying all along during this extraordinary time together is that we will always remember the days which are special days as the Father’s Day that we spent together...apart. For me this year Father’s Day is unique because leading up to today I have had the joy of having my three adult daughters with me at home for pretty much the last three months, up until last week when we took Rachel back to NYC for work. You probably know this if you are a father but it is very different being a father to children, than it is to adolescents, than it is to teenagers, than it is to adults. That transition isn’t always easy to recognize and as a Father your role and your input and your responsibilities are changing and shifting throughout all of those stages in your child’s life.

I remember not really appreciating my father until my second year in college. I wrote that long letter to my parents thanking them for their sacrifices, thanking them for the example that they set, and apologizing for the stinker that I really was, and I was a bit of a stinker especially compared to my brothers who were angels. I remember thanking my dad for being a good father. There is still times today when I wish he were around. Last week my aunt, my father’s sister made a comment on Facebook while she was following our service and said how much I remind her of my father. That was amazing to hear.

Today we have two stories in the Bible that deal with fathers. We are presented with Scriptures that aren’t necessarily the easiest to read or understand. The first Scripture which we just read a father willingly places his child, his only child, the child that he loves on the sacrificial altar. The second, the one we are just about to read, the Father willingly allows his child to leave the safety and the security of the home to strike out unprepared and ill-equipped for what comes next in the child’s life. Now both of these fathers trust and rely upon God’s protection and promise.

In both, we find, a long embrace which translates into a love that the Father has which translates for us as the type of love that God, our Father, has for us. A long embrace in our time today represents a sign of love, a sign of not wanting to let go, a reaffirmation that we are united, we have a bond, whether we like it or not, we are unified by something more powerful than what we can see or touch or feel. Let’s read.

READ SCRIPTURE

One of the favorite songs for the kids in preschool and also our Sunday School program here at FPC is the one Father Abraham. You do all sorts of funny non-sensical things while you sing it. It goes: Father Abraham has many sons, many sons has father Abraham, I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord. While the Scripture doesn't really show Abraham as a prolific Father, that would have been his grandson Jacob who had twelve sons and from whom the nation of Israel gets its tribes. But it is a fun song to sing anyway, if for nothing else the silliness that is involved in it.

In fact, if you followed along in Abraham's life throughout the Scripture he is not really what I would consider a model father figure. Before he had children his nephew was really his son and he was certainly considered his father figure. His nephew Lot almost is burned alive in Sodom and Gomorra and his wife dies as she becomes a pillar of salt. Abraham had a chance to intervene on their behalf and kind gave it a half hearted try. His first biological son he runs out of the camp with his mom to die in the wilderness. God has send an angel to save them. And now today we find him with his son, look at vs. 2, his son, his only son, the one he loves, whom he takes to offer as a sacrifice, as a burnt offering. So while Abraham is considered the Father of all monotheistic religions from Judaism to Christianity to Islam, in Scripture he really isn't describes as a Father of the year model.

In this Scripture in both verses 2 and 7, even in the midst of this journey to the sacrifice of Isaac, he is described as a father, and in vs.7 his own son poignantly calls out to him Father, where is the sacrifice. The story ends with God intervening, but also recognizing the faithfulness of Abraham, after all in vs. 1 we see that this was a test. I can just picture Abraham releasing Isaac from the bonds and the long embrace that must have followed. The long embrace that signified that they were family, that they were still and would always be Father and son.

That long embrace between father and son, father and daughter, is seen again in the parable that we have in Luke 15. This parable is considered one of the best known, if not the best known parable in all of Scripture, so when you preach on it you know that there is a whole array of saints who have gone before you who have preached on this parable and you sitting in your living rooms or in your homes wherever you may be, have probably heard a parable on this sermon many, many times before. So, I enter this parable with some real recognition that you may have heard this story before. But it is a story that bears repeating.

Traditionally this parable is called the prodigal son. But if you look at the parable it is surrounded by a couple other parables that are also defined by this negative approach, for example the lost sheep, and the lost coin. Instead, today, we are going to take the positive approach. There is too much negativity in the world today, so instead of the lost sheep, why don't we call it the found sheep? Instead of the lost coin why not call it the found coin, instead of the prodigal son, today we are going to call this parable the parable of the loving father. In fact, as you read it again, you will see that this parable is much more about the love that the father shows both sons, than it is about the son.

It really is a simple story that we tend to complicate because we are more interested and more entertained by the details of what the son goes through than we are by the inexplicable and overwhelming love that the father shows. We all have a bit of narcissistic tendencies where we want to focus on the son who more reflects us than on the Father who is God and we like to talk about the son and the gory details of him spending his time with prostitutes and wallowing with pigs because we can feel we can somehow relate to living a sinful life, when those details are not even necessary, all we need to hear is that the Father loved the son unconditionally. It should always be about God and we so often make it about us and what we want, and what we like, when God doesn't really care about that. Today, this Father's Day, we are going to focus on God, our Father and the inordinate love that He shows us.

At the center of this parable is vs.20, let's go there now. Follow along as we read that while this son who was broke was returning, look at vs. 20: "he was still far off, his father saw him, and filled with compassion, he ran, and put his arms around him, and kissed him." A long embrace takes place after the Father sees his son returning from far off. For some of you who may have had a conflicted relationship with your father this image may sound a bit hollow because you can never imagine your Father showing this kind of love, this kind of pursuit of you. Notice, the Father didn't go out looking for him, but he did see him from afar off. He was waiting for him to return every day.

There are some details that we have to lift up here about our Father. There is no tough love here on the part of the father. He doesn't wait for the son to come to him, grovel a bit, make his say his apology and make sure that the apology is genuine and lay conditions down to ensure the apology has teeth to it. The Father runs to him, did you see that in vs.20, the son doesn't run to the father, the father runs to the son. Even before he is able to get an apology out of his mouth the father embraces him. How the father celebrates the son who had been gone for so long.

Even while we were yet sinners...Romans 5:8 tells us that God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us. This verse tells us more about God than it does about us and our sin. God loves us even before we can say we are sorry, even before our feeble attempts at apologizing, and somehow thinking we deserve God's love because we turn to him.

But for us sometimes grace offends fairness and forgiveness comes across as enabling. Yes, let him come home, but a ring, a robe, slippers, fatted calf, a party. There is no provision for that in our minds. We would limit the love of our God for other people, while embracing the love of God for us. Let him return to bread and water, not a fatted calf, let him wear sackcloth and not a new robe, let him wear ashes and not a ring, let him come back in tears, not in rejoicing, let him kneel before us and not dance. Does the party that is thrown cancel the seriousness of the sin and the gravity of the offense against the father? To some of us it does, but not to the Father.

In this parable we see that the Father not only loves us unconditionally and extravagantly and that grace abounds, but he actually shows us his love concretely, by doing that which we least expect: bless us abundantly even while we were yet sinners. The son can't even get the words out before the Father's long embrace envelops him. The embrace of the younger son doesn't negate or translate into a rejection of the older son. The love of the tax collector does not negate the love of the faithful. We find it difficult to be offended by God's grace toward another especially if we have serious questions about that person's conduct and character.

But this parable has never been about us, and we try to make it be about us. It has always been about the love that God has for all humanity that is unwavering. We often focus on what we think we lose when God loves others, but this parable, this lesson in life is about what we gain because of God's love. The party would have been thrown regardless of his attitude, whether he was repentant or not. That's who God our Father is, he loves us, period. No conditions.

Karl Barth who is my absolute favorite theologian of all time lived through WWI and was a pastor in the midst of Europe as a German never once preached a sermon where he addressed the war directly as the war. He stated:

"We would also like to pray with our whole heart, 'O land, land, land, hear the word of the LORD!' Hear the Word of the Lord that has come so palpably in our reach in the powerful events of this time. With what an awesome *responsibility* we burden ourselves if we do not listen

to God now! Hear the Word *of the Lord*—not the word of human beings, not even the word of the pastor.”

This Father’s Day I encourage you to focus on God’s long embrace and the love that he has for you. Amen.