

Sermon Text for June 20, 2021 – Father’s Day

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 48:8-12, Luke 15:11-32

“The story of the prodigal son or the loving father”

Happy Father’s Day to all of you who have played a fatherly role in the lives of so many people. It is fairly easy to find models in Scripture to use when we are looking at Mother’s Day. My favorite, of course, is Deborah who is the strong judge and ruler who gives us the mold for what girls should aspire to become, righteous and sought after. The models we have in Scripture for mother’s are plentiful. But not so much for Father’s as we look to use examples in Scripture of men who serve that role.

There is Father Abraham, but then we have to overlook the whole sacrificing his son Isaac which leaves a bit of a question mark in using him as a model. Or his nephew Lot, but offering up your daughters to a violent mob in order to save your bacon doesn’t make you a father of the year candidate. Noah is someone we could consider, but cursing your son for eternity seems a bit harsh on this side of history. So we are left with few choices in Scripture of fathers to use as examples and templates after which to aspire.

Each of the father’s that we find in Scripture are terribly flawed, which while it may reflect accurately the state in which we find ourselves, we need an example of a father who is not. Today we have the parable, the story, of the loving father. There are no flaws in the Father whom we worship. So today, instead of dwelling on the flaws of our fathers instead of the faith of our fathers, let’s focus on the love of our Father in heaven and use his example as our template. The template is this: God has treated each of us equally, every single one of us here in this church, and every single one of us outside of the church. God doesn’t have favorites, except for all of humanity.

The love of God is shown in that while we were yet sinners, unrighteous, God sent his son for us, died for us, so that we would have eternal life. So today our model is not the flawed father, that in our own life we may find plenty of examples to underscore, like we find in Scripture, but rather the model of the perfect father. Let’s read.

READ

This parable today is considered the most famous of all of Jesus’ parables. When we are very familiar with something then we tend to make assumptions that often are not accurate. We have always called this parable the prodigal son, while in reality the focus is not on the son, but

rather on the Father and how the father treats all of his sons in equal fashion. God is the Father and we are the sons, we are the children, and sometimes it is hard to understand what it means when we say that God treats all of His children equally.

One of my favorite Brett Foote stories is one that I am sure he won't mind that I tell. Brett began his work here at FPC as an intern with Lancaster Bible College and then not soon after we hired him as our youth director. The first meeting we had together was in my office and he was young, 19 or 20 or so and you know, when you meet with the pastor for the first time you want to give a good impression and it was pretty evident that he was trying, and trying real hard to make a good impression.

As we were meeting in my office someone who was very disheveled knocked on the door, his clothes were dirty, his hair was out of wack and he looked like what you would think of when you see a person who might be homeless. Brett, not wanting to miss an opportunity jumped up out of his seat, opened the door, and in one full motion shook his hand and said, hello there, welcome, so good to see you, do you need the food bank? The assumption was that because of what he looked like he was in need, while it was a 50 year member of our church who had been in his yard mowing and had come to just give me a message.

We do that all the time don't we? We assume people are who they are because of the way that they look, because of the church that they go to, because of the cars that they drive, the list is never ending on the assumptions that we make when we interact with someone and those assumptions either place them on the favorable scale or the unfavorable scale in our eyes. Our assumption is that people should be treated according to who they are and what they have done. Our society and our culture, even churches, create false hierarchies that are based upon how many years you have been a member, if you are an officer of the church, if you are a member of the church or not.

But our goal here is completely different. God has called us to interact with anyone who steps through the doors of this church, anyone who steps foot in the Borough of Strasburg, anyone who finds themselves in our presence virtually or otherwise, to be treated as if they had just been created by God that very same day.

The assumptions that we carry today were also carried by the Pharisees and the religious leaders in Jesus' day. This most famous of parables is actually an answer to an accusation made against Jesus. We have to set the context to this parable. Look at vs.2 and you see the accusation leveled against Jesus: "This man welcomes sinners and eat with them." Jesus is defending himself against these accusations with a series of parables that normally we define in

the negative. We call them the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son. But why in the negative? Why not the parable of the found sheep, the found coin, and the loving father?

So today's parable, today's story sets up the Pharisees, or the faithful 50 years members, or the Presbyterian lifers who never left the father's side (I can say that because I am one of them), vs. the sinners off the streets who are just here to find how they can milk something out of us. How do we interact with and what do we feel about each? Do we treat one of these groups of people differently from the other?

To begin our first Scripture sets up the same scenario that we find in the parable of the loving Father. Joseph, who was lost, is now found and his father, Jacob, or Israel, has an opportunity to bless his grandchildren, something he would never imagine being able to do. Here we find a picture of pure and sheer love expressed as in vs.10 he kisses them and embraces them. This is exactly the image that we find when this youngest son arrives after being away and considered lost or dead, just as Joseph was. Now Joseph did nothing wrong, the youngest son did a lot wrong. But both are greeted and treated in the same way. Today is not about laying blame, it is about seeing how the Father greets all of his children.

In our parable we begin by seeing that there are two children. In the midst of the story we read that the Father goes out to meet both of his children. The youngest while he was still a far way off he runs to him and showers him with blessings, material blessings. The eldest while he is home and pouting because his little brother who almost ruined everything is being treated like a hero. It is really at this moment in the end of the parable that the father realizes that both of his sons are lost, in their own way. That is our condition as well, without the love of the Father.

Each of the sons take their turns in trying to establish how the father ought to define them. The youngest insists that his father should no longer consider him a son, he is not worthy to have him as a father and the eldest tries to define his relationship with the father as the favorite, as the one who deserves more than anyone the grace and the affection of the father. But we never have the right to define our or someone else's status before God. God is the only one who can choose how he will treat us. He has told us already multiple times how he will treat us. From the very beginning God has looked at us, smiled and said: you are very good, regardless of who we are or what we have done or the messes we have gotten into or the faithfulness that we have exhibited.

The offense that begins this parable is one of eating and spending time with sinners. They should be judged. But for those of you who came this father's day looking for a Presbyterian sermon on judgment and sinners in the hands of an angry God, I present to you the loving Father. There is no disciplinarian here. Rather we have a father who is gracious, full of love, forgiving and extravagant.

But what offended the oldest son? It was the party. What teenager who is invited to party with his parents would take them up on it? But it was more than that. Let my brother who caused so much trouble take his place at the table, sure, that is fine, but throw a party for him? Let the prodigal return but to bread and water, not fatted calf, in sackcloth, not a new robe, wearing ashes, not a new ring, in tears, not in merriment, in kneeling, not in dancing.

But the embrace of the younger son did not mean the rejection of the elder. Such is God's love, but we find it so difficult not to be offended by God's grace toward others. We find ourselves in a historic moment. For the first time in over 40 years we have a new national holiday. The recognition of Juneteenth by our nation is bound to upset some of us as the talk of reparations might also upset us.

Some of us might say not fair, we work hard and nothing is handed to us. Why do we object to that which is being done and benefits others and does not harm us? Why do we object to righting a wrong that has taken place that we have never dealt with in a significant way? We might object to the celebration, but why would we, it is part of our history that our ancestors thought it was okay to own another human being, someone who was shaped and formed in the mud just like we were and breathed life into and God smiled and said, you are good.

The father loved the two sons equally. The metaphor breaks down in so many places, but in others it works. Likewise, this pandemic has for some created a false narrative that has given an opportunity to pursue an insidious approach to life. People are told you can't love those who wear masks and those who refuse to wear masks. You can't love both those who are vaccinated and those who are not vaccinated. You have to choose sides. You can't love democrats and republicans.

Someone has been lying to us and telling us that we have to choose sides, and if you love the people who are on the wrong side of me then you are my enemy. That is a lie. Our God, our Father, loves us, all of us, and has chosen a side, and it is the side of love and forgiveness and grace for all of us, especially those of us who are the youngest brothers and who have spent our lives in sin. For even while we were yet sinners, still, God chose our side.

There is a condition worse than death, and that is to be lost. There is a condition better than life, that is to be found. Jesus Christ is the offering of a loving father to prodigal children. No matter what was done in the past, it is now a time only for love. Let us take our example from our loving Father, in whom there are no flaws. Amen.