

“What Kind of a Father is God?”

Date: March 14, 2021

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Occasion: Lent 4, Year B

Themes: Grace, love, forgiveness, mercy, judgement

It was October of my senior year in high school when the accident happened. I had just gotten my driver’s license in July. It was a rainy night when I asked my father to borrow the car to go to a Christian youth rally called Young Life. Dad granted my wish but told me to be extra careful as there were wet leaves on the road, making them slippery and dangerous.

I heard what my father said, but like many teenagers I thought sarcastically to myself, “Why does he treat me like a child? Does he think I *won’t* be careful on a night like this?” A few hours later I would have to eat my words.

After the Young Life meeting I offered to take a couple of friends home. We had just finished our soda and French Fries at a local burger joint. I pulled out of the parking lot onto the main road. I then asked the first person for whom I was driving, where she lived.

Hastily she told me to turn right, “Right here!” Not wanting to miss the turn I did what she told me. Unfortunately I was in the left hand lane of a road that had two lanes in each direction.

As I turned, a car came up over the hill. I never saw it. The driver slammed on his brakes, but it was too late. Fortunately no one was hurt, but the front end of my Dad’s 1967 Chevy convertible was badly damaged.

I didn’t want to go home that night. I was so embarrassed and ashamed of myself, for being so careless. I was afraid of what my Dad would say. When I got home, remember this was before we had cell phones; I walked through the door and told my Dad what had happened.

Boy was I in for a surprise. I didn't get the big lecture I thought was coming. I didn't get grounded like I thought was going to happen. And my Dad wasn't angry like I thought he was going to be. Instead of anger, I received compassion.

That night, I didn't get what I deserved. Instead of judgement, I received grace. And as I look back on that night in 1972, I realized I had discovered something significant about who my Dad is. And in the process I learned something about who my Heavenly Father is.

Judgement and grace are two qualities of God which, if not held in proper balance, will leave us with a wrong understanding of who God is. Judgment is getting what we deserve. Mercy is NOT getting what we deserve. And grace is getting what we don't deserve – mercy and love.

God is not a severe authoritarian who looks over our shoulder every minute of the day to see if we have broken one of God's rules. But neither is God an indulgent parent who allows His children to do whatever they want without consequences. Another story:

Bishop Kenneth Carder, now a retired bishop of the United Methodist Church, tells this story about himself. "While a student at seminary I took a preaching class from Dr. Earl Ferguson. He was a difficult and demanding professor. New students were told to avoid his classes if at all possible. His classes were un-affectionately labeled "Fergatory." He goes on.

"I had already served as a student pastor and thought of myself as a decent preacher. At least my parishioners told me so. When it was my turn to preach in his class I re-used one I had already preached in my local church and the people told me it was a good one. So, I gave it a shot.

After preaching in class, my fellow classmates were gentle with their feedback. After all, no one wanted to be too critical because it would soon

be their turn. But Dr. Ferguson was not so gentle. He criticized my sermon from start to finish. It was demoralizing. Dejected and hurt I went home to my wife and told her what happened. I was so disappointed in myself that I seriously thought about dropping out of school and giving up the ministry.

However, the next day I did return to school. On my way to class I heard my name being called. You guessed it; it was Dr. Ferguson. He said to me, "That hurt yesterday, didn't it Ken?" I replied, "You don't know how bad that hurt." He responded, "Oh yes I do."

Then, the professor gently but firmly said, "Ken, I think we need to understand one another. I assume you are here to be the best preacher you can be. I'm here to help you become that. Now, if I'm wrong about that assumption, then we need to talk about it."

Then he put his arm around my shoulder and said, "I believe in you. I think you've got what it takes to be a fine pastor. And I'm going to hold you to it." Reflecting on that experience, Bishop Carder then said, "I now understand that being a child of God, being a disciple of Jesus consists in being held, **and** being held accountable."

Isn't that powerful? Listen, all the commandments in the Bible were given to us to show us how to live. God has given us guidelines, principles and rules by which we are to live. But we all fall short. We're all guilty of breaking one or more of God's rules, and doing so on a daily basis.

Now listen, my sin may not be exactly the same as your sin. But each of us has his, or her, own sinful nature. None of us has the right to be accusing anyone else of being a worse sinner than ourselves. We've all broken the rules; we've all disappointed our Heavenly Father in some way.

According to the righteousness of our holy God, we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The Law reveals our sin, but the Law

does not put us in a right relationship with our Heavenly Father. It is pure grace which reestablishes the relationship. When I smashed the family car, I goofed up big time. But my father never stopped loving me. And my father restored the relationship. I was living in fear until I encountered grace.

So here's the thing. There is righteousness-with-anger (which is what many people believe and expect of God). And then there is righteousness-with-love (and *that* is the unexpected grace which Jesus reveals to the world).

John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son into the world so that whoever believed in him would not perish but have eternal life." We all know that verse, or have at least heard it before. Now, you do know the verse which comes right after it, John 3:17?

It says, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him." O my! Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a soul like mine. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."

As Jesus hung on the cross, Jesus spoke these divine words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing." When we sin, we are not being our True Self. We are out of our right mind, living in alienation from the Father. We don't know what we're doing.

But Jesus forgives us. Jesus offers us grace for our shortcomings, for our failures, for our sin. We don't receive what we deserve – judgment. Instead we are offered mercy and grace, love and forgiveness. Judgment merely continues the alienation between humans and God.

Forgiveness heals and re-unites. Love is the only power in the world which leads to true and lasting change in the human heart. One more story as we close our time together this morning. The story goes that Babe Ruth,

the homerun king of baseball, was playing in Cincinnati. He was now striking out more often than getting hits. And he was beginning to make errors out in the field.

On one such occasion, when he had badly misplayed a fly ball hit in his direction, the Babe was walking back to the dugout, his head on his chest. The crowd was booing him loudly. When suddenly, a young boy, tears running down his face, ran onto the field and threw his arms around Babe's legs.

Ruth, who always had a big heart for kids, reached down and took the boy in his arms. He continued to walk back to the dugout, carrying the boy who had not given up faith in his hero. Silence fell on the packed stands. And the booing stopped.

The fans were so moved that simultaneously they all stood in silent tribute, as the great athlete and the little boy passed by, in one of the most touching episodes in American sports history.

In our moments of defeat, when we fall down, when we don't measure up, we need someone who will hold us, comfort us and remind us that we are still persons of worth. Jesus Christ does that for us. Hanging on that old rugged cross, Jesus stretched out his arms and embraced the world. And by his love, he makes the wounded whole again.

What kind of father is God? A God of love, grace and forgiveness, who both holds us and holds us accountable, but always offering us His unconditional love. A father who cares more about his son than he does a smashed fender, and yet who always wants us to be the best we can be.

God loves you and me and all of us, even when we don't get it right every time. To such a God, I can give my life. Will you? Amen.