

“Thank God for Father”

Date: June 21, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Father’s Day

Theme: Fathers

Texts: Ephesians 6:1-4; Luke 15:11-31

Father’s Day occurs on the 3rd Sunday of June, but do you know the history behind this holiday? The idea for creating a day for children to honor their fathers began in Spokane, Washington. A woman by the name of Sonora Smart Dodd thought of the idea for Father’s Day, while listening to a Mother’s Day sermon in 1909.

Having been raised by her father, Henry Jackson Smart, after her mother died, Sonora wanted her father to know how special he was to her. It was her *father* that had made all of the parental sacrifices, and was in the eyes of his daughter, a courageous, selfless and loving man.

Her father was born in June, so she chose to hold the first Father’s Day celebration in Spokane on the 19th of June, 1910. In 1924, President Calvin Coolidge proclaimed the 3rd Sunday in June as Father’s Day. And that’s how it came to be.

I have chosen as my text for this Father’s Day the parable of the Prodigal Son. At least that is the name most-often given to this beautiful story, told by our Lord Jesus. And yet, in spite of the title we have given it, the real star of this story is the father. This parable is aimed towards people who are especially troubled and uncertain as to whether God still loves them.

You remember how it goes. The youngest son asks for his share of the inheritance money and then goes off into the far country and squanders it all away. He finally ends up doing the most

degrading thing a Jew could think of doing – feeding pigs. Jesus could have said nothing more horrifying about him than that.

Why did Jesus paint for us so bad a picture as that? Because he was trying to make us understand something about the father's love. This boy's sinfulness was so great there was nothing left about him that could motivate the father to love him. So, if the father continues to love the young man, then it is only because that is the nature of the father. The boy has done nothing to merit that love at all.

Well, the son finally realizes the futility of the lifestyle he has chosen and decides to return home. Now notice, there is no mentioning of the son cleaning himself up first, or getting his act together. There is no mention of him earning any money to pay his father back. All we are told is, "he came to his senses."

As far as we know, he returned wearing the same old dirty clothes he wore when he feeding the pigs. He didn't return with a copy of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* in his hands. No indication that he had gotten his life together. Without a penny of his father's great wealth, he returns home.

This carefully crafted story continues when the Father comes running to meet his son. The Father doesn't even wait for the son to get all the way home. Even before he hits the driveway, the father runs to meet him with open arms. And here is the point Jesus is making: *this* is the story of how God loves you and me.

We fathers learn how to parent by watching God at work, or we should. Being a loving father does not always come naturally. It's

hard work. It means ignoring our own needs at times, so that we can focus our attention on the needs of others.

Some of us had fathers who were able to do that. Others had fathers who could not. Part of our new, Christ-like character is the ability to give unconditional love. What do I mean by unconditional love? Let me give you an example.

Some of you may remember Keith Hernandez, for many years one of baseball's top players. He is considered by some to be the best-fielding first baseman of his time, winning 11 straight Golden Gloves and setting major league records for most seasons leading the league in double-plays and lifetime assists by a first baseman.

Hernandez was a batting champion for having the highest average, the Most Valuable Player award in his league and even the World Series. Yet, with all of his accomplishments, he missed out on something crucially important to him – his father's acceptance and recognition.

Listen to what he said in a very candid interview about his relationship with his father: "One day, I said to my father, 'Dad, I have a lifetime 300 batting average. What more do you want?' My father replied, 'But someday you're going to look back and say, 'I could have done more.' "I was crushed."

Now, there are two ways of looking at Keith Hernandez' success. You might say that because his father was never satisfied with Keith's success, he was driven to excel. That is undoubtedly true. Some of you can relate to that. You've done splendid things in your life, in a vain attempt to win your father's praise.

However, there is evidence that there were also negative consequences to Keith Hernandez' drive to the top. He has been accused of both substance abuse and a vain, arrogant attitude that have alienated many in the baseball community. Whether that is true or not, we can say without hesitation that conditional love, that is, love that is based on accomplishment not on unconditional acceptance, has damaged many people.

It is the very antithesis of Christ-like love. Christ-like love says, "I love you for being you. Not for your achievements. Not for being an honor student. Not for being outstanding at sports. I love you without reservation, simply and solely because you are my child."

That is the love we receive from Jesus Christ, and that is the love we seek to transfer to our children. Amen?

If, somehow, you never received that kind of unconditional love from your parents, I hope you will receive it today from Christ. You don't have to be a super achiever. You don't even have to be a super-Christian. God loves you because you are you.

Back to the parable of the Loving Father, or the Prodigal Son, if you will: There were two sons if you remember. The one that I feel sorry for is the older brother. He had been a good boy all of his life. Secretly, I think, he is envious of his little brother who got to have a little fun. He's been super-responsible all of his life, and he'd like to let his hair down a bit, like little-bro.

The older brother can't get past the fact - his father still loves this bratty little kid-brother. He just can't let it go; he is not as forgiving as his father. He is full of resentment. There has probably been some sibling rivalry in this family for years; don't you think?

This family has some serious issues. But guess what. All families have issues, even the ones that look good in public. They've got issues at home to deal with. We all do.

But did you notice how the Father responds to the older brother? He's not mad at him for not being more welcoming. He didn't chastise the younger son and he doesn't chastise the older son. He loves them both. He offers His love to both sons equally.

The Father welcomes home the bad boy. Then the Father tells the good boy that he has always loved him, and everything that the father has the father will share with him. The Father, who represents God in this story, is full of love for both boys.

Families are complicated, aren't they? Parents do the best they can, and often times the kids don't appreciate what they've been given. Sometimes they're resentful, like the older son. And let's be honest, not all parents are perfect. Most of us make a lot of mistakes.

But we can look to our Heavenly Father, who loves us with perfect love, whether or not we are good or bad. God's love is not conditional. So, if we're good or if we mess up, God's love for us does not increase or decrease. God always wants what is best for us.

Thank God for our fathers. Not perfect people by any means. There is only one perfect father, our Heavenly Father. But thank God for Dads, who help us to know God's love. Amen? Amen. Let us pray.