

## “The Love of a Father”

Date: June 21, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Matthew 7:9-11; Mt. 10:29-31

Occasion: Father's Day

Themes: God's love; fathers

Today we salute fathers. “Dads, we love you.” Whether living or deceased we honor and acknowledge these important men in our lives. The role of a Christian father is more important in today's world than ever before. It is a different role than in earlier generations.

In most households today, Dad is called upon to play more of a nurturing role in caring for children. If Mom works outside of the home, then Dad takes a more active role in doing household chores. Dad is no longer “lord of the castle,” but is an important partner in his marriage and in the raising of the children.

Today's father needs to be nurturing of his children, supportive of his wife, and yet at the same time provide the spiritual leadership of the home that the Bible accords to fathers. It is a rare man, a special kind of man, who can combine all three of these qualities.

According to Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, a father's involvement with a child increases the child's IQ, the child's motivation to learn, and the child's self-confidence. In addition, children who have involved dads are more likely to develop a sense of humor as well as an “inner excitement.”

In other words, Dads *do* make a difference. We salute fathers this day. Your family needs you more than ever before.

The most common image that Jesus used in describing God was that of “Father.” It makes me think that Joseph must have been a very special kind of father. We center much of our attention on his mother, Mary, but

Joseph must have combined those very special qualities of strength and gentleness that we associate with Jesus.

Jesus had a very keen knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures. In the Jewish home, it was the father who had the primary responsibility for his son's religious instruction. Of course, we know that Jesus had a unique relationship with God. But still, I have to believe that Joseph was probably a very influential role model for Jesus. Why else would Jesus have chosen the image of "Father" to portray God?

Our beloved Lord's Prayer begins, "Our Father..." Let's stop and look at those first two words of this great prayer. *Our* Father: the word *our* means that this is a corporate prayer and not a private prayer. When we pray we realize that we are part of the family of God, a world-wide family that includes everyone. God made us all. God loves us all.

*Our* Father is Father of this church. God is Father of this great nation but also the Father of all the nations of the world. *Our* Father is God of the good and the bad, the rich and the poor, the well-to-do and the down & out.

*Our* Father is God of all the races – which means that we are all kin; we are all brothers and sisters. *Our* Father reminds us that we belong to one another and we have a responsibility to one another. Am I my brother's keeper? The answer is yes, Our Father wants it that way.

The word *our* does not imply that we own God and get to tell God what to do. It means that God is Father of all the people of the world, a concept that is so simple and yet so hard for many to grasp.

In addressing God as Father, Jesus makes it clear that meaningful prayer involves a trusting and loving intimacy. I love the intimacy there in the words *Our Father*. The phrase *Almighty God* declares the power and

the majesty of our God. But *Our Father* declares that God cares for us like a loving parent. There is a closeness that is implied. Even though God is the Creator of the Universe, God wants to be known in intimate ways. God wants fellowship.

God wants to relate to us on a personal basis, as a parent to a child. God wants to hear from you, every day. God wants you to tell Him what's on your heart; your secrets that you don't tell anyone else. What are your fears? Your desires? What mistakes are you embarrassed to tell anyone else? You can tell God. Climb up onto Papa's lap and have a little chat.

For some of us, our fathers were not the easiest person in the house to talk to. He was often too busy, or it seemed as though he didn't understand, or perhaps he was the disciplinarian of the family and we were a bit afraid of Dad. You certainly weren't going to tell Dad your mistakes if you thought you were going to get a lecture, or it would get you into trouble.

Some fathers even abused their children, or abandoned the family. Dad was not there for them. For some people, they find it hard to pray *Our Father*. I used to be of the mindset that it was wrong to ask people to use the term *Father* because it was a stumbling block for some people.

And then I read an article by a woman professor by the name of Roberta Bondi. She teaches church history at the Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia. She recalled how difficult it was for her to use the term "Father" for God, since her own father was an authoritarian perfectionist who left the family when she was only eleven.

She writes that she substituted the words *Mother* or *Friend* for the word *Father* for a number of years. She encouraged others to do the same. However, she then recalled how Philip asked Jesus if he could see the

Father and Jesus replied, “When you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” Professor Bondi writes, “Jesus was nothing like my earthly father.

Once I stopped confusing *my* father with God, then I was able to forgive my father for his failures toward me, and let my father simply be who he was – a man, not God, but simply an ordinary human being with ordinary weaknesses.”

Well, my personal opinion changed right there. We don’t have to force people to stop using the term *Father* for God. If they find the term *Mother* helpful for a time, fine. But we need to be reminded that God is the role model for fathers and not the other way around.

Perhaps if we see that only God is the perfect Father, then we can stop expecting our earthly fathers to be perfect. And then we can once again call God *Our Father in Heaven*, knowing that God’s love informs who and what our earthly fathers should be.

Our God is love. In Matthew 10:29-31 we have one of the most important Scriptural reminders of the love of our Heavenly Father for his children. “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?” Jesus asks. “And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

What a moving testimony to the very intimate love that God has for each of us. God is intimately aware of what’s going on in the world. God knows about coronavirus and racism. And God, in God’s love, has given us resources to respond to both. God cares about what happens to his children, as does a loving father on earth.

Perhaps the most famous verse of the Bible reminds us of that. “For God so loved the world, that He gave his only Begotten Son.” Jesus did not

come to condemn the world but to save the world. Some would lift up the image of God as a divine ruler and judge. But the better image of God is that of a loving Father, who cannot be happy until all of his wandering children have come home. God does not want to smash people into submission; God yearns over his people and tries to woo them with love.

In Matthew 7:9-11 we are reminded that God desires to give us good things; God wants to bless us and bless us abundantly. So do good fathers.

There once was an old man who had a young son. They lived in America but in the man's later years he had a desire to return to the Old Country. So, he saved all the money he could and bought a ticket for himself and his youngest son to sail across the Atlantic Ocean.

Having spent all of his money on the tickets, he stored away some apples, cheese and dried meat in his knapsack, so they would have food for the journey. They had been on the ship for several days, and in fact were nearing the end of their voyage.

For all these days the father and young boy had stayed inside their small room, eating their humble bread. But near the end of their trip, the boy decided to venture out. After an hour or so he returned, with his arms loaded with food.

The old man was angry with the young boy, thinking he had stolen the food from someone else. "Oh, no papa," the boy replied, "didn't you know? All this food is free. It came with the price of the ticket. There are tables and tables of food, just waiting for us to eat.

How many of us miss out on the banquet table of God's love, because we think God couldn't love us that much, believing we don't deserve God's love. "If God knows what I'm like on the inside, God couldn't love me the way I am. God might love me a little, but not a lot."

Oh my friends, God loves us abundantly, regardless of what we've done, regardless of our past, regardless of what we're like on the inside. God doesn't want us eating crumbs but rather God wants us to feast. Out of God's vast treasure, God wants to give His love for each one of us.

At the core of who God is, is love. And that is what we celebrate this Father's day, when we recognize that in some small ways our earthly fathers are modeling what the love of our Heavenly Father is like.

Let us give thanks to God for all of our fathers who reflected God's grace. And let us give God praise and honor for his immeasurable love. Amen.