

DON'T GIVE UP ON ME DAD

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

June 17, 2007

Scripture: Genesis 9:20-29; Luke 15:11-32

If you're looking for a heartwarming picture of a great dad, a father like Red, Tim Russert's dad, or Robert Young as *Father Knows Best*, then I'm not sure the Bible would be the first place to look. The images of fathering in the Bible are a mixed bag, as the two opposite images of Noah and the Father of the Prodigal in today's lessons suggest.

Noah as a father is captured in a most unflattering photograph. It is one of those moments that no father would like to have remembered by his children or have anyone else remember for that matter.

The Flood is over, they're on dry land. God has promised never to send a tsunami like that again, and God even gives the rainbow as a sign of the promise that no evil will befall Noah or his descendants in the form of a flood. So in celebration, Noah, who was a man of the field, planted a vineyard. In due course, one night, having harvested the grapes and crushed them and aged the wine properly, at last it was ready, and Noah sat down and enjoyed the fruits of his labor, a little wine tasting party that turned into a binge.

He became drunk, the writer of Genesis tells us, so drunk that he passed out commando in his tent, lying naked and exposed. One of his boys, Ham by name, went in to check on his dad and saw *his father's nakedness* as the Hebrew turn of phrase puts it so delicately. So Ham left his father's tent and told his brothers Shem and Japheth. We should have known that this was more than just a humility issue at stake here, because humiliated at the news, Shem and Japheth took a large robe, and held it on their backs with their faces away from their father, entered the tent stepping backward so as not to look on their father's nakedness, until they dropped the robe over their father's body.

It sounds like an act of modesty to our modern ear. But something is not right because when Noah sobers up and awakens, he realizes from the presence of the robe, what *Ham* has done and he is enraged. It is a fury that exceeds what any father here might be able to comprehend. He curses Ham forever, and blesses Shem and Japheth. And from that time forward there was enmity between Ham or Canaan as he was also known and the other two boys.

We missed something in the translation evidently. Because the English translation of uncovering the nakedness of the father doesn't really convey the whole meaning. Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament scholar, writes that uncovering the nakedness of the father is a euphemism which implies that Ham has penetrated "the ultimate personal mystery of the parents by probing their most vulnerable action or condition."¹ In other words, Ham may have had intercourse with his mother, or Ham may have taken sexual advantage of his father in his drunken state. In a word incest is suggested. *I told you the Bible was not the best place to look for sterling examples of family relationships!*

Fathers and sons often have a tough time in the Bible, it's a Freudian extravaganza at times. The old father, Isaac, is tricked by his younger son Jacob who

steals his brother's birthright. Israel had twelve sons but of them all he most favored Joseph, the baby in the family and gave him a coat of many colors, the envy of his older brothers, whose envy grew so great that they plotted to kill him and sold him into slavery.

Then, of course, there's Lot in the town of Sodom who is willing to trade his own daughters for sexual favors rather than surrender the male visitors who are in his house. The Bible presents many images of father/child relationships, and not all are reassuring.

But there are good fathers portrayed in the Bible. Among the best is that father in the parable that Jesus describes, a man who has two sons. One son leaves home and goes into a far land and squanders his inheritance on loose living. The other son is faithful and stays home and looks after the farm and never gives his father a moment of worry. But both sons rebel before the parable is over.

The one son travels far away and falls from grace, then returns home to a warm welcome. The other son is resentful, angry, envious, complaining about the unequal treatment between himself and his brother. He feels that his father is too soft a touch, too easy on the boy who has messed up his life. But in the end we see that the love of the father is so great for both sons, that he is unable to be ungracious, or unforgiving to either. This is the father who, no matter how badly you mess up, is faithful, forgiving and understanding. His acceptance is truly unconditional.

We all want a father like that, unconditionally loving, forgiving, gracious. The kind of dad to whom you can open your heart, tell your troubles and know that you will get a fair and compassionate hearing.

Our images of what make for a good father have changed somewhat over the years. Nowadays we have come to expect that a father must have a tender side, a compassionate side, a kinder, gentler nature that was not as overtly expected when I was a kid. Now, dads are expected to make the bed, and share in washing the dishes and tucking the kids in for the night, reading stories, changing diapers. It is not enough to simply earn a living and bring home a salary. No more pipes and slippers and the evening paper when dad gets home at 6:00. No more dinner on the table. Dad gets his own dinner, and maybe feeds the family, too, because mom gets home from work later than dad.

Dad shares in the laundry, and attending school functions, and making sure the kids get their homework done. It's a brave new world for dads, and men are still learning how to do it.

I marvel at the two dad and two mom families we have in the church, how the parenting instincts of both partners must broaden to include as much of the spectrum of parental nurture as possible. But that same thing is happening in all families, as men and women both work longer each day and rely on each other so much more to share in parenting.

This is not easy. Fatherhood has fallen on hard times in this country. 25,000,000 kids or 36% of all children live apart from their biological father. 40% of children who live in households without a father have not seen their father in at least a year.

According to government statistics, children who live without contact with their fathers are, in comparison to their counterparts:

Five times more likely to live in poverty.
More likely to bring weapons and drugs into the classroom.
Twice as likely to commit crime.
Twice as likely to drop out of school.
Twice as likely to be abused.
More likely to commit suicide.
More than twice as likely to abuse alcohol or drugs.
More likely to become pregnant as teenagers.
And overwhelmingly, the best predictor of crime in a community among males is the percentage of absent father households.²

We are in a difficult period with regard to fatherhood. Fathers, and men in general, are the convenient target of blame for all that is wrong in marriage, in society, in the world. And while there is no getting around the dangerous side effects of too much testosterone, fathers are not all that's wrong in families, in spite of what passes on the street as common knowledge.

So I would like to say a word of encouragement and thanksgiving for fathers today. I know that there are as many experiences of fatherhood in this congregation this morning as there are each of us who have or have had a father, which is all of us. And there are all kinds of father relationships, biological fathers, step-fathers, foster fathers, fathers in law, adoptive fathers, and all the variations.

I barely knew my own father. He died when I was five years old and my mother never re-married. I always wondered what it would be like to have a father. Whether my dad would have been gruff and hard to approach. Or warm and embracing. Or dangerous somehow, with mood swings and unpredictable flare ups. Girls have different relationships with their fathers I am told. I wouldn't know. I didn't even know what it was like to be a son to my dad.

Which has always been what has made the controversy in the church about the language we use about God, not so difficult for me to accept. I got it early on. I understood what women were saying back in the 60's and 70's about language and how it shapes our image of ourselves and of God. Women in seminary in the early 70's were asking outrageously fresh questions about the sexuality of God. "Was God male?" they asked. "No? Well, then why do we call God 'him'?" "Why is God only 'Father' and not also 'Mother'?" Are we not talking about the nature of God, and our understanding of God's nurturing of us, and our relationship with God as His or Her children?" Isn't the whole point to somehow capture in our descriptive words, our pronouns and nouns, the closeness and personal nature with which God loves us and invites us into communion and community?

If so, then all our language fails, to some extent, to capture the real essence of our closeness to God, and God's closeness to us.

God, after all, will not be limited by images of being high and lifted up, on a throne, far away in heaven, looking like a grandfather perhaps, or at least distant and unapproachable. God is more close than that, more intimate, more loving and kind and personal and even needful of relationship with us, if we can speak in such terms at all, every bit as much as we are needful of relationship to God.

If that is the case, then God is closer to us than we have ever imagined. Jesus captures the essence of that closeness when he speaks of God as Abba, in Hebrew, a word that is perhaps most accurately translated dad or daddy, the diminutive relationship of a child to a father. And the point is not the masculinity of the noun, but the proximity to which it points, the intimate relationship of trust and closeness that it implies.

Sometimes you see around Father's day, a sweet picture of one sort or another in the newspaper advertising soap or soft water or towels or just happiness: and the image is a father bare-chested holding a child who is naked, suggesting perhaps that the child is emerging from a bath and being dried by his father. It is the kind of scene that every father nowadays has lived and experienced. There is nothing sexual suggested in it, but much that is intimate, private, close and endearing, the sweetness of a father tending and caring for his child.

We are, after all, skin hungry, all of us. We learn it early on. We need to know that we are not alone, and we know it when our flesh touches that of another. Even hand on a hand may be enough to communicate that. I was always grateful for my mother's sake that in her nursing home the aide who tucked her in each night rubbed her feet and gave her a good night kiss on the cheek, expressing in a tactile way that she was not alone. And isn't that all any of us want to know? That we are not alone?

Touch is what God has done to us in Jesus Christ. Taken flesh and dwelt among us. Held us close, like a father holding a helpless child next to his beating heart. It is something of that that lies behind Jesus' name for God, Abba, Daddy.

Annie Lamott tells a wonderful story in her latest book, **Grace (Eventually)**. Annie is an unconventional Presbyterian, a recovering alcoholic, a single mom whose son Sam is now seventeen. She talks about the problems and issues involved in being the single parent of a teenage boy. In one chapter she describes Sam's three closest male friends and the bond of affection that she holds for them. She opines,³

... Most of us [parents] have gotten off relatively easy so far – our kids are impossible only half the time, screwing up, troubling our hearts, making dumb choices, forfeiting fragments of their dreams, but still basically okay.

Annie goes on to describe one of the boys in more detail, Sam's friend John.

[John] is often at our house, part of the smelly Jurassic herd who hang out in Sam's room. He's a good person - observant, dignified, funny, and tenderhearted, just like Sam at other people's houses. John has always done wonderfully in school, without much prodding, and it was his and his parent's dream that he would go to a top liberal arts college and pursue a career in journalism; at least until this semester, when he tanked. Now they hope he can just get in anywhere decent.

I called his father one day in tears, because Sam was in danger of failing a class. John's father and I are allies, he listened with the tough gentleness only the parent of another great kid in trouble can muster. He

expressed love and respect for Sam. Then he said that John had just flunked algebra, and so could not get into any of the UC campuses.

“He’s been working for so long to get into a really good school,” said his dad. “And then? It’s gone, in the blink of an eye.”

[Annie continues] Neither of us spoke for a moment. This is obscene, that higher education is so desperately cutthroat that a single adolescent slip can make such a difference in the quality of the rest of a young person’s life. [John’s dad] continued haltingly; “It’s just the way it is. We talked about it last week when his report card arrived – that what we had hoped for was probably not going to happen now. It was a sad conversation for both of us. And later that night, when I was in bed, he came into my room and told me, quietly, in the dark, “Don’t give up on me, Dad.”

Each of us has our own thoughts of our fathers on this day, the good memories, and thankful ones, the hard memories, and some best forgotten. But I wonder if John’s words spoken to his father in the dark of his room, at a time when all his dreams lay shattered at his feet, is not the dearest hope and fondest prayer of every one of us, when all our dreams lay in pieces at our feet; the hope that God will not give up on us. That the one who gave us life, would not lose faith in us, nor us in him.

Take heart. The good news of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ is that God, our heavenly Father/Mother has never give up on us and never will.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2007.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) p. 90.

² Statistics quoted by Senator Evan Bayh, National Fatherhood Facts and Statistics, see Senator Bayh’s website, <http://bayh.senate.gov/www/Fatherhood4.htm>.

³ All quotes are from Annie Lamott’s essay, *Blink of An Eye* in *Grace (Eventually)*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2007. 198-201