

New St. James Presbyterian Church
16th June Trinity Sunday and Father's Day 2019
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WHAT MAKES A LEGENDARY FATHER?

Text: And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and the Lord God called unto Adam and said: "Where are you?" (Genesis 3)

The stories of Adam naming all the animals and of God walking with Adam and Eve in the garden at the cool of the day are most beautiful images for the level of trust between God and the first ones. It speaks to me of the awesome wonder of relationship between God and human beings, between a great Father and his children. The story of Adam and Eve is the tragic parable of the loss of that trusting relationship. Can we earthly father's and mothers ever regain that most fundamental of all relationships, our relationship with the great One who made us all?

This is Father's day! What makes for a legendary father?

Ravi was a small boy who lived in a poverty-stricken area of Bogota, Columbia. His mother had died when he was three and a half years old. A month after her death Ravi wandered into the kitchen of his meager house in search of food. He had not eaten that day. When he noticed his father cutting up slices of banana and eating them, he asked for some pieces for himself. His father refused and muttered angrily. The little boy persisted. In a soft pleading voice, he asked just for one small bite. His father jumped up from the table in fury and with the cutting knife in hand plunged it into his son's neck, then purposely slit his throat twice.

Neighbors found the child soon afterwards and rushed him to a hospital where he miraculously survived. Since he had no relatives to claim him after his father's arrest and imprisonment, he was placed in an orphanage where he lived for two years. He barely spoke, and he acted in ways that showed signs of trauma and disturbance. Would you adopt such a damaged child? What kind of father would?

In the story of the Prodigal Son we came across a great father. We know from results that he was a good parent, because he did have one dutiful son. How many of you have had more than one child only to discover that things just didn't seem to work out *with one of your children*? The other one was just fine. Was that what happened to the prodigal's father?

You see the prodigal had his own ideas. He wanted out, along with his inheritance. In Jewish law he would get about one third of the estate. His father agreed to that and chose to trust his son. I wonder how many of us would have, because we would know whether or not our child was trustworthy, wouldn't we? The father had to know, didn't he, what the prospects were? Yet he

gave his son the assets and it happened. The son blew it all. Did the father lose his trust **or was he playing a deeper game?**

In those days how would a good father treat the wayward son who had messed up? We get some clues from the prodigal. He obviously thinks that his father would take him back as a paid servant if he admitted his failure before him and before God. The elder brother is also reflective of the values of the day. As far as he is concerned, he has had it with his brother and expects that his father will not celebrate the prodigal's return either. But he was flat wrong about that!

The father in the story of the prodigal son is not just a good father, he is a legendary father!

Why?

The prodigal's father knows the truth of what Stephen Post argues in his book **Why good things happen to good people**. Post says: "Respect is love's careful guardian. Its essence is acceptance, to hold another as 'irreducibly valuable'. The word respect means in Latin to look again, past first impressions, biases, into another's personal history, struggles and life journey and perspectives... And so, its way, is freedom for self and others."

The prodigal's father sees his son as 'irreducibly valuable', no matter what he has done. Unlike his elder son who uses merit points as the yard stick, this legendary father loves unconditionally. And the father expects that his trust in his son will one day be rewarded. We know this because he stands somewhere each day where he can see far down the road that leads to his home, hoping that this will be the day when his son comes home.

So, when the prodigal does return home this father extends **grace and acceptance**. But he is such a great father that he goes well beyond that. He gives his son his own ring of authority, and his best robe and exudes joy and happiness and throws a feast. And he also attempts to reassure his elder son that he too is loved, but that as a father he just cannot be angry with the prodigal, because it is as if the prodigal had died and come back to life!

There are two fathers in the story of the Prodigal Son, one earthly, one heavenly... This parable is Jesus' answer to the question what is God the Father like? The prodigal's father is like God and has the same characteristics. God loves us all unconditionally, no matter what we have done, the door is open, and we can come home. God is patient with us. God waits for us to come to our senses and realize our need of God. And when we get it, God welcomes us, puts a ring on our finger, a new robe on our shoulders and throws a party of happiness. Jesus once said that when any sinner repents there is much rejoicing in heaven.

God is not into merit love. He keeps no score card of wrongs. He is long suffering and happy. He knows that respect is the careful guardian of unconditional love and that the way of respect, of regarding someone as irreducibly valuable, is the way of freedom.

Jesus in this parable puts before us the ideal father. *What makes a great father is a man who strives to love like this. God is like this and that is good news for us all.*

At the latest General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, a decision to fully include members of the GLBT community passed. It now goes to the congregations next.

Many congregations have been taught that God was a God of wrath and judgement and opposed to gay and transgender people. So, when the church passes a motion to fully include the gay and transgender community and allow them to marry and hold office in the church, they think that God would be angry. I understand that the Korean Presbyterians walked out when the vote passed. Many folks feel this way and the church has split over this across the globe.

But with respect to the Koreans and the other dissenters, the story of the Prodigal in Scripture teaches us that we are **all irreducibly valuable** in the sight of God. That is Christianity 101. As Jesus says even the hairs on our heads are numbered- that is how valued we are.

Many of the folks in these congregations would probably identify with the elder brother a lot. He too was into conditional acceptance. But that is not the kind of Father we meet in this great parable. Instead we meet the God of GRACE and unconditional love.

Barry Neil Kaufman decided to adopt Ravi the little boy from Bogota. 'Bears' Kaufman is a wonderful human being in my view. He is the sort of man who is making the world a better place. He is a legendary father.

Let me tell you the conclusion of the Ravi story.

Kaufman was warned not to adopt Ravi by Kaufman's own father.

"Are you looking for more trouble?" He said.

A psychologist friend counseled that Ravi would have been injured physically, mentally and emotionally and would show signs of that trauma the rest of his life.

But Kaufman and his wife believed, or were at least hopeful, that any child or adult could flourish in spite of having had to endure the most horrifying circumstances. He looked forward to adopting this child as having everything to do with happiness and having fun with this child.

The day came when Kaufman and his wife were to pick up little Ravi at the airport. The entire adoption had been completed without their ever having seen him. They had decided at a distance of thousands of miles to be mother and father to this stranger, considered damaged material by other people's standards.

On the day of Ravi's arrival, Barry and his wife waited impatiently at the airport terminal gate while hundreds of people came through the doors after clearing customs and immigration. Suddenly Kaufman says, "I recognized our contact person emerging from the crowd. He held the

hand of this thin little boy whose dark brown eyes rapidly scanned the lines of waiting people. I leaped over the ropes, knelt directly in the path of this youngster and reached out my hands to him. He smiled at me. He knew! Then he lunged forward and jumped into my arms. I loved him from the very first instant!

Kaufman writes: “So many people romanticize love. They talk of chemistry and bonding. They say that relationships take time to nurture and develop. When I had known Ravi for only minutes, my love felt as strong and deep as the love I had for my oldest children who had lived with me for over a decade. Love like happiness would never be a mystery to me again. I had witnessed the sweetness, the power and the miracle of a decision.”

How did this decision for unconditional no strings kind of love work with this damaged child?

For the first six months, Ravi became an appendage always holding on to Kaufman’s leg as if to find a secure place to anchor himself. He seemed hesitant to speak, even in Spanish. In the years that have passed this little guy has stretched himself and matured into a fine athlete and honor student. Just before the year of the publishing of the book ***Happiness is a choice***, Ravi in 1991, gave a speech in front of an auditorium filled with his classmates and was elected president of three grades.

Kaufman writing as a parent says this: “Each of our six children has given us opportunities to access more of ourselves. Instead of being diminished or stretched too thin by their challenges, we have uncovered an ever-growing wellspring of love and ingenuity.

As I teach a class or walk with my children through the surrounding forest, I feel I have found a sense of happiness, peace and communion with God... that I once would not have dreamed possible.”

I close with a word to our wonderful Fathers on Father’s Day. **Let respect be the guardian of your unconditional love for your children, and you too will walk with a sense of happiness, peace and communion with God, in the garden of creation, in the cool of the day, with your children.**