

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

Sunday, June 17, 2018

The Rev. Dr. David Thompson

“What makes for a great father?”

Text: “A father of the fatherless... is God in his holy habitation. God setteth the solitary in families: he bringeth out those which are bound with chains. (Psalm 68:5-6)

A young boy was driving a hay cart down the road, and it turned over right in front of a farmer's house. The boy ran down the lane to the door and the farmer came out, saw the young boy crying and the overturned cart and said, "Son, don't worry about this, we can fix it. But right now, dinner's ready. Why don't you come in and eat with us and then I'll help you put the hay back on the cart?"

The boy said, "No, I can't. My father is going to be very angry with me."

The farmer said, "Now don't worry, just come in and have some food and you'll feel better." The farmer took the reluctant boy by the arm and pulled him inside to eat dinner. Afterwards, as they walked outside to the overturned hay cart, the farmer said, "Son, don't you feel better now?"

The boy said, "Yes, but I just know that my father will be very angry with me. " The farmer said, "Nonsense. Where is your father anyway?" The boy said, "He's under the hay. "

Are you a father? Do you feel under the hay today? Good news! It's Fathers day, your one day to be able to be spoiled and helped out from under the load of life!

I want to talk to you today from the sacred traditions about what makes a great father. A great father is all about having **a great heart!**

In looking for great- hearted fathers in the Scripture, King David comes to mind. Although he had many flaws, Scripture says of David that 'he was a man after God's own heart.' Certainly, when his son Absalom died, a son who had betrayed him utterly, David still loved Absalom and wept bitterly at his death. When Bathsheba bore him a son, who became ill, David would not eat until after the boy had died, pleading all the while for his life to God. Whatever else he possessed, King David had a great father's heart.

In the New Testament, the father in the story of the Prodigal son, is a model of unconditional love. The prodigal leaves home, squanders his wealth on wine women and song, until it is all gone, and he is reduced to eating the same food as the pigs he is looking after in order to stay alive. He then travels home to his father and his father receives him royally, to the consternation of the prodigal's brother. But the Father welcome him home, puts the robe of honor on him, gives him his own ring of authority and kills the fatted calf for a feast. This is a father who is

like God says Jesus, accepting us, forgiving us, and loving us unconditionally. The prodigal's father is **a father of great heart**.

Have you ever wondered what it is that makes a great-hearted father?

When Elijah asks the poor widow for bread it seems heartless doesn't it, but it is not in the light of what happens?! Elijah has abundant faith for the tough times he faced. The widow has a great heart also, for she gives her last morsels of food to Elijah- an act of trust, when she has herself and her son to feed. Elijah and this gentile widow are well matched. They both have great hearts.

The centurion that meets Jesus and asks for his servant to be healed has a great heart. Many a person in those days would not care too much for a mere servant. Not this man. He goes out of his way to see if the servant can be healed. Jesus commends his faith as exemplary saying that he has not encountered faith like this in all of Israel.

The Dalai Lama talks about our ability to generate a good heart and a positive attitude. Now if any man on the planet had reason to be discouraged it would have to be the Dalai Lama. He has seen his country stolen and exploited by the Chinese. All his life he has struggled on behalf of his people to win his country back through peaceful means. But independence for Tibet remains elusive. Yet the Dalai Lama has the most wonderful sense of humor and there is a great peacefulness about him. He has generated a positive attitude and a good heart. He has been a great father to his people, even although in the face of the might of China, he has been unable to restore sovereignty.

I think that there is another aspect to the question as to how fathers become people with great hearts. **It is how they choose to handle adversity.** Some fathers do not do well with adversity, resorting to the victim mentality, then they sometimes bolster it by alcoholism and drugs. When all goes well they are fine. But let some adversity come into their lives and 'presto' they are victims.

Probably the best world treatise on a great heart is the Book of Job. Everything happens to Job. He loses everything but his life. But adversity does not buckle Job's resolution to trust in God. Every test imaginable takes place except the taking of his life, yet he survives. He says about God: "Thought he slay me, yet will I trust Him!" And after the trials are all over Job is even better!

There was a soldier whose heart was tested. He had found a book to read called On human Bondage in his training camp in Florida, and it was full of insightful hand-written comments. His interest was sparked- a certain Hollis Meynell had written her name in the fly leaf. He had looked her up in the phonebook and got an address and was about to contact her when he was called overseas suddenly. He took the address with him and began to write to her.

Over the passage of time and many letters he felt that he loved her. He asked her for a picture, but she refused. She had explained "If your feeling for me has any reality, any honest basis,

what I look like won't matter. Suppose I'm beautiful. I would always be haunted by the feeling that you had been taking a chance on just that, and that kind of love would disgust me. Suppose I'm plain (and you must admit this is more likely) then I would always fear that you would go on writing to me only because you were lonely. No, when you get home meet me at Grand Central Station. I will be wearing a red rose. You hold the copy of On human bondage in your hand and we will recognize each other." The soldier was very nervous and excited when the great day came. Suddenly down the platform a young woman was coming. She was tall and slim and very beautiful with blue eyes, her blond hair in curls and her chin had a gentle firmness. He thought that in her green suit she looked like springtime come alive. He started towards her entirely forgetting that she was wearing no rose. "Going my way soldier?" she asked somewhat provocatively. Then he saw Hollis Meynell standing almost behind the girl, her gray hair tucked under her hat with a red rose in her lapel. She was more than plump, her thick ankle feet were thrust into low heeled shoes. The girl in the green suit walked quickly away.

The soldier felt like he was being split in two. The woman's face in front of him was gentle, kind and sensible. Her eyes had a warm, kindly twinkle.

This soldier did not hesitate. His great heart came through and he said to himself, this would not be love but perhaps something for which he would ever be grateful, something even more precious than romantic love- a friendship for which he had been so grateful in his darkest hours of war and therefore would forever be grateful. He raised the book On Human Bondage high. "You are Miss Mynell? I am so glad you could meet me...may I take you to dinner?"

The woman's face broadened in a tolerant smile. "I don't know what this is all about, but that young lady in a green suit, the one who just went by-begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said that if you asked me to go out with you, I should tell you that she is waiting for you in that big restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of a test. I've got two boys in the army myself. I didn't mind obliging you."

I was talking to a consultant once about how to build a better administrative board. He said when you are selecting members for a board do not overlook people who have had problems in their pasts. Life throws us all curves. It all depends on what we do with the curved balls. "Give me a battle- scarred leader every time over someone who has never had a problem" he said. "They make great board members because they have had to grow through adversity."

Over coffee he told me that he had in the last year lost his wife to cancer. He had been very close to her. He had had to watch her die in his arms. He said after he had healed, he was the better for this very hard experience. It had opened up his heart and he was much more forgiving of those people who had been wounded by life. He was not a victim although the temptation had been very great to feel sorry for himself. He had not done that. He had cared for his wife and focused on her. His own heart had been broken, BUT, as he slowly healed, its capacity for empathy and love had grown. He had a great heart. And he became a better consultant because of that!

Abraham Lincoln by all accounts did not have a great father or anything but a dutiful relationship with him. His father was opposed to his education and burned Abraham's books saying he had to help him work the farm. Thus, Abraham was largely self-educated. But that adversity did not take away Lincoln's ambition. After failure after failure over the course of his life and much adversity, Abraham eventually became elected to the highest office in the land. But the job before him was one of the very hardest of presidencies. He had to preside over a bloody and terrible civil war.

In the office of commander in chief, Lincoln often visited hospitals to talk with wounded soldiers. An officer pointed out a young soldier who was near death and Lincoln went over to his bedside asking whether there was anything he could do for the boy.

The soldier did not recognize Lincoln and with some effort whispered, "Would you please write a letter to my mother?"

Lincoln took down the following letter: "My dearest mother. I was badly hurt while doing my duty. I'm afraid I am not going to recover. Don't grieve too much for me please. Kiss Mary and John for me. May God bless you and father."

The soldier was too weak to continue, so Lincoln signed the letter for him and added "Written for your son by Abraham Lincoln."

The soldier asked to see the note and when he had read it he said "Are you really the President??"

"Yes, I am" said Lincoln. Then he asked if there was anything else he could do.

"Would you please hold my hand? It will help to see me through to the end."

In the hushed room the tall, great hearted President, took the boy's hand in his own careworn hands and spoke words of encouragement until death came.

I fortunately was blessed by a father with a great heart. But I also am aware that there are many who have not had fathers with great hearts. But I encourage you to **choose not to be a victim**. Instead do what Abraham Lincoln did. He determined to be a great-hearted Father anyway!

He was not afraid of fathering those outside his family who were in need.

Great fathers are out there, and God can bring them into your life to heal you at the broken places that only fathers can heal.

And Fathers, remember, if you are battle- scarred by life and your heart has become great through suffering, there may come a time when you can father someone in need and hold their hand through light and dark days. You can be like God.

For "God setteth the solitary in families: he bringeth out those which are bound with chains."