

June 19, 2011

Gracious God, May these words be your words of grace. Amen

Father's Day is always challenging. It is a day to lift up the fathers in our lives, to celebrate their gifts and to do some good grilling. For many the main job of a father is one of protector and provider. But as the decades have gone by, we have expanded our understanding of fatherhood to be a role of nurturer, teacher, one who nourishes and is present. He is the one who sings songs, provides in partnership a safe home, cuddles at night, and builds a life long relationship with his children. He works with tight budgets and complains about the cost of gas. He coaches and cooks, encourages respect and routy behavior all at the same time.

This is a day to say Thank You for many fathers. But for many others this is a hard day. There is grief over missed opportunities, bad relationships, and absent fathers... There is also grief for fathers we love who are no longer with us.

My own relationship with my father was complex. We would wait for him by the door in the afternoons. We couldn't wait for him to come home. He would bounce us on his knee and sing "This Old Man". But he also yelled a lot and scared us. He tried to spank me just once. I stuffed my pants full of books to avoid the pain. When I leaned over his knee for my spanking, he thought it was so funny, he could no longer spank me. We all have our stories, don't we?

The book, later made into a movie, "A River Runs Through It" is about 2 sons, Norman and Paul and their Presbyterian minister father who grew up in Montana. Their father was strict, demanding, and loved, loved, loved fly fishing. The story is a prodigal son story. Norman, the oldest went away to college and eventually became a professor. He and his father were connected by the love of language. But Paul, he was the one who stayed. He was also the one who went out drinking, fighting, gambling, and taking risks just for the heck of it. He was tough and wild. But when he came home, the family would gather around him and hang onto his every word as he told amazing stories. And his artistry for fly fishing connected him and his father together in the deepest sense.

His father would worry about Paul, shake his head in disgust, and lecture him. But it all fell on deaf ears. One night Paul's antics caught up with him, and he was gone. Their father tried to make sense of it, asking Norman again and again about Paul. All Norman could do was respond by saying, "All I can tell you is that he was a fine fisherman." The father responded, "O you know much, much more – you know he was beautiful." Even a father who believed that people were a mess and had to work hard to receive grace, was full of unconditional love when it came to Paul.

Why did Jesus tell the story of the Prodigal son? It is really much better named, "The Forgiving Father." You see the people of Israel referred to God as Yahweh – "I Am". Through their eyes and faith experiences, they saw God as strict & punishing. If they stepped out of line, there would be heavy duty consequences. God in many ways was

seen as a father who was distant, always watching, worrying, protecting, and keeping them in line.

Jesus, on the other hand, experienced God as Abba – Daddy. Jesus wanted to share with the people he touched his experience of God . . .one of infinite grace – who exuded love that made absolutely no sense.

The Prodigal son first insulted his father by wanting his inheritance immediately. It was hurtful and a slap in the face. He wanted to get out of the house and live the good life. He didn't know how far money could go – not far was the answer. He spent the money on gambling, and booze, and it was gone quickly. When he ran out of money, he worked wherever he could. He would even eat what was given to pigs. To a Jewish man this was the lowest of low, for pigs were seen as disgusting and impure. He would be treated better as a servant in his father's house than on the streets. He walked down that road of shame, his head hanging low, with his head full of apologies. His father saw him walking down that road . He didn't wait. He and ran down to greet his son. So many nights he must have wondered where his son was. His father embraces him with open arms. No crossed arms, no toe tapping, no lectures, no conditions. It was sheer joy. He was home. Open arms – what grace. . .and not only that – that father threw him a party.

Right about now is when all of us parents get uncomfortable. This father must have been the worst disciplinarian in the world. He threw him a party?! The son didn't deserve a party! He deserved not more than a hot meal and a quick trip to the servant's quarters to begin to earn his father's money back. His son had insulted him, lost half of his money. We understand though - sweet relief and joy- no more sleepless nights - his son is home!! You see this unconventional father is the one Jesus knew and wanted/wants others to know.

Most of us here today can relate to the older brother, the responsible one, the one who works hard, who sticks. For those who would judge the son and judge the father, the message is this – God loves extravagantly and the door is wide open for all. Come to the party, experience the joy. Don't sit outside, fuming, just because you want to be right – come on in and be loved.

In “A River Runs Through It” the father preaches a closing sermon. Here are some of his words, “All of us at one time in our lives will ask God, ‘what can I do for this loved one?’ We are willing to help. We don't know what to give. Or if we do, it will not be received. The people who are closest to us will elude us. But we can love them completely without ever completely understanding them”

God loves us completely. And if asked what God knows about us, even if we mess up big time, God knows that we hold beauty. God as a father remembers when we were first held , how unbelievably gorgeous we were; God remembers all of our firsts, AND our failures and still sees our beauty. God remembers when we first knew love and sees our beauty.

And because of that, love abounds. So come to the party!