

So, it's Father's Day.

You know, portrayals of Fathers certainly have changed a lot, even during my brief lifetime. Although the series predates me by a few years, I bet a lot of us remember the father portrayed by Robert Young on *Father Knows Best*. Jim Anderson. You know he really always did seem to know best.

And then, we have Beaver's dad, Ward Cleaver. He screwed up a lot, but his heart was in the right place, and he was trainable.

By the 70's we were into the likes of Mike Brady. A good heart, but really really bad hair.

And now we come to the modern epitome of media Fatherhood. Homer Simpson. Not really much of a role model, but maybe just a little too accurate reflection of modern fathering.

At the risk of starting a trend by quoting the Simpsons every week, since Melanie used some of Homer's wisdom last week, I feel kind of authorized to follow it up this week with this gem of wisdom Homer gave to his son Bart on being a Father:

“Son, I won't lie to you – fatherhood isn't easy, like, say, motherhood.”

Okay, back to church. The scripture Melanie read might well be the most famous story or parable that Jesus told. It's been preached on literally millions of times, and I'm sure most of us have heard really good moving and powerful sermons on the passage, and some not so good insight on the same material.

But I really wanted to focus on this scripture today because it gives us a great snapshot into Jesus' description of God as our Heavenly Father.

You know, we live in politically correct times, and it's becoming less and less common and less acceptable, at least in main line protestant circles to refer to God as a Father. We've developed a lot of alternative language for

and about God; God as creator, protector, and expanded our images into non-male, non-patriarchal ways of thinking about God. And I think that's a very good thing. Any time we try describe God, we're trying the impossible; we're trying to fit an infinite, indescribable God into a finite box of human making, so we can attempt to get our mind around God.

So when we expand our God-language and imaging, we're participating in images and descriptions that help us more completely understand all aspect of the divine.

But with your indulgence, today I want to focus on God as a heavenly Father. There's a risk in this; for many sitting in this congregation, their experience and perception of a Father is not positive, and it's extremely difficult for those of you with that reality to have good connotations of God as a father. But I ask again for your indulgence, and promise a special word for you at the end of this sermon today.

Jesus repeatedly in the Gospels refers to God as Father, and often even more familiarly using the term "Abba". That best translates to Daddy, and the derivation of the word is that sound a baby makes and learns to associate with Father. Just as "mama" and "dada" are typical in our society as the sounds a baby learns to associate with a mother and a father, "abba" was the sound that babies learned to associate with Father in that place.

But Jesus' familiar addressing of God as Father was not just a special term he reserved for his own usage, that acknowledged his unique divine relationship with God. No, a few chapters before the reading we had from Melanie, he instructed his followers to pray to God by saying "Our Father" in the prayer we now know as the Lord's Prayer.

And he wasn't just following Jewish tradition here. Although the pattern of the Lord's prayer follows the patterns typical of Jewish prayers of that day, the address to God was definitely NOT typical. Jesus was once again advocating for the radical – he was transforming people's perceptions of God as a remote, authoritarian divine but impersonal power into a Father, a Father whose greatest longing was for a restored relationship with humanity.

And Jesus followed up this teaching by giving us the parable Melanie read today. The parables in the Bible are rich resources; they reflected typical Jewish practice of the day of teaching by use of story. And when Jesus gave

a parable, he wasn't just telling an interesting story. He gave parables to reveal aspects of God, and to describe the Kingdom of God that happens when humanity lives in relationship to God.

And the parable of the Prodigal Son that Melanie read does just that. I think the title that's been given this story, the "Prodigal Son" isn't a very good one. You see, the focus of the story is less on the disobedient child (by the way, if you want to insert yourself in the story, that's ALL of us). Instead Jesus is using this story to teach us about the nature of God, so the focus of the story really is much more on the Father. We learn several things about God in the parable.

First, as the story opens, the younger son comes to his Father and demands his "share" of the estate. A little bit of historical background here; A younger son's share of the estate was small – much less than ½ of what the oldest brother would receive, and what it consisted of was discretionary to the will of the Father. Generally the land and family home would be inherited by the oldest son, and other personal property and financial assets divided among the rest of the children. And an inheritance was very rarely given to the child before the father's death, and virtually never before a younger son married and "settled down". But the Father in this parable, in fact gives the son his portion.

God is like that. We are so blessed in our lives, far beyond what we deserve, and long before we've done anything to earn it. By and large we have comfortable lives, and we're blessed by our families, our church, our neighbors, by a country and political system that provide us with freedom to work and prosper, speak our political minds, and to worship as we see fit. We don't deserve all of our blessings, but thank God, God is generous.

Secondly, God loves us enough to allow us free will. Free will to make wrong decisions, just like the son in the parable. Free will to turn our backs on God, on our family, and what is right. The son in this story uses his blessing to rebel, to turn his back on his father and go his own way.

And we all make the same choice, all the time. We so often feel self sufficient in our abundance. We take comfort and strength in the size of our retirement accounts. How often is it that adversity – illness or financial misfortunes, are what it takes to bring us back to church, back to a relationship with our Creator?

But God allows us to make these choices. God knows that a man or woman without freewill is nothing more than a robot, incapable of a fulfilled and loving relationship. If I hadn't grown up a Methodist, this point alone would make me one. John Wesley, in contrast to other reformers, in particular John Calvin, believed that God gives this free will to humankind, that our lives are not pre-ordained, that our relationship, or lack of relationship with God is not something that is pre-destined.

You might have heard the story of the Methodist Minister and the Presbyterian Minister who were walking down a long flight of stairs while discussing the differences in the Wesleyan theology that the Methodist espoused, and the Calvinist or Reformed theology believed by the Presbyterian. Along the way, the Presbyterian tripped and fell head over heels for a dozen or more steps, before ending up sprawled out at the bottom. Rushing down to help him, the Methodist asked the Presbyterian if he was hurt. He responded, I think I broke my leg and hurt my back, but boy am I glad to get that over with! Now that's admittedly a simplistic, broad-brushed humorous take on the Calvinist perception of God, but I don't believe God predestines every illness, every accident, every wrong step we take, and every wrong decision we make. God grants us the freedom to turn our back on God, even to go to our own "distant countries" and indulge in our own wild living, away from God's loving presence.

Which brings us to a third portion of the parable, and my favorite part. I want to reread just this brief section which describes the Prodigal Son's homecoming.

18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' 20 So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

Did you catch the phrase in verse 20? But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him . . .

Every time I read that verse I get chills. Because Jesus is telling us that like that Father, God is not just passively waiting for us, arms folding, and reluctantly listening for excuses, before bringing us back at some reduced

status. God is like that Father, who is scanning the horizon, waiting for us to come home. Although God loves us enough to give us the free will to turn our backs and go away, God never stops watching for us, never stops waiting for us, to welcome us home.

Dr. Debra Peppers is a renowned educator and talk show host in Missouri. But her road there was difficult, and marred especially by trouble in her adolescent years. By high school she was a withdrawn rebellious teenager into drinking, drugs, and frequently running away from home for extended periods. In the chapter in the Wayne Holmes book, "The Embrace of a Father" which she wrote, she provides the following letter written by her Father, and left on her pillow one night when she was 17.

My Darling Baby Girl,

I write this as you have threatened to run away again. I am leaving this on your pillow with the hope that you will get it before you leave. I know at 17 you are a young woman now and we can't stop you from going. Your mom and I have asked ourselves a thousand times where we went wrong . . . where we failed you. I would give anything if we could go back to the days when you were Daddy's little girl and would snuggle up on my lap and bring all your hurts and wounds to me to "make better."

I only blame myself for all that has gone wrong and would give my very life to another chance to make it right. I didn't see soon enough how much you were hurting. Mommy and I have prayed and cried for you more than you will ever know and have asked if we were too strict or too lenient, too giving or not giving enough. All we know is that we love you and want you to talk to us. Please reconsider before you leave again and let's see if can't work if out one more time.

Dearest Debbie Girl, we love you with no strings attached. God brought you to us, and no matter what, you will always be my precious baby girl. When you read this, no matter how late, please come talk to me.

Always,

Your loving Daddy

But Debbie didn't get that letter that night. She had already left, disappeared without contact for several months. When she returned her father put all his efforts into helping her restore her life. He negotiated with school authorities to have his daughter readmitted to high school, and worked out a plan for her to catch up on missed work.

She went on to earn 3 degrees, was named Missouri teacher of the year in the 1990's and had a successful radio talk show. On the night of the Missouri State Teachers banquet where she was honored as teacher of the year, her parents gave her that letter; they'd been waiting for just the right time. Debra goes on to reflect in the book how her parents' love drew her back home again, and opened her heart and mind to the fact that God, her heavenly Father, loved her in just the same way.

And that's the ultimate point of this parable. God loves us. Loves us enough to bless us far beyond what we deserve. God loves us enough to grant us free will, even if that means we make wrong choices, even if that means we turn our back on God. And God loves us so much that he wants nothing more than to be in a loving relationship with us. So much that he stands, watching the horizon, waiting for us to come home.

At the beginning of this sermon I promised a last word to those here who struggle with seeing God as a father. Maybe you had an abusive father, or a neglectful father. Maybe you didn't have a father in your life at all, or worse wish you hadn't. And no platitude, no sermon, no book will ever make that right. Because just as you were given free will to love and bless and do right, or to not love, to not bless, to not do right, so was your father.

But you need to know, just as this parable teaches, God does love you as a father, with strength and compassion, and a longing for you to come home that has God watching the horizon and waiting for YOU. Maybe the word you need to hear today is not that God loves you as a father loves you, but, **GOD DOES LOVE YOU AS A FATHER, AS YOUR FATHER, SHOULD HAVE LOVED YOU.**

Let us pray.