



BECOMING A FATHER

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

Catalog No. 1174

Luke 15:20-32

Third Message

John Hanneman

September 6th, 1998

I want to begin our third study in the parable of the prodigal son this morning by reading a story from Philip Yancey's recent book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997, pp. 49-51):

A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the Tigers play. Because newspapers in Traverse City report in lurid detail the gangs, the drugs, and the violence in downtown Detroit, she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Detroit.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car—she calls him "Boss"—teaches her a few things that men like. She lives in a penthouse, and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline "Have you seen this child?" But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child. Besides, most of her friends are runaways, and nobody squeals in Detroit.

After a year the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. "These days, we can't mess around," he growls, and before she knows it she's out on the street without a penny to her name. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. "Sleeping" is the wrong word—a teenage girl at night in down town Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She

no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she's piled atop her coat. Something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

God, why did I leave, she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. *My dog back home eats better than I do now.* She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn't apologized to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with the lights on since Bay City. Tiny snowflakes hit the pavement rubbed worn by thousands of tires, and the asphalt steams. She's forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard. A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. *Oh, God.*

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smoothes her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips, and wonders if her parents will notice. If they're there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know..."

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

The message of this modern-day prodigal daughter story is that we can come home. But the thing that draws me into the story is the father's response. It forces me to ask myself, would I be that kind of father?

In our studies in the familiar parable of the prodigal son we have already looked at the story from the perspective of the younger and older sons. Today, I want to cover these verses from the viewpoint of the father. Actually, the father is the main character in the story. The parable might well be called the parable of the father's love, for this is the central point of the text. The power of a father's love is one of the most dynamic forces in the universe.

Let us read the text together. Luke 15:20-32:

And He said, "A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving {anything} to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion {for him,} and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry.

"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and {began} entreating him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found' " (Luke 15:20-32, NASB).

I want to begin by making a number of observations about the father.

He is willing to let his children go. He will not hold them back, forcing them to remain at home. He knows it is more important for them to find home in their hearts rather than in their bedrooms.

The father is willing to be taken advantage of, even humiliated. When his younger son asks for his inheritance, he gives it to him. When his older son quarrels with him in public, he responds to him softly and tenderly.

The father is always initiating. He runs to his younger son while he is still some way off; he goes outside and initiates a conversation with his older son.

The father loves in extravagant and unexpected ways. He offers his best gifts, a robe, a ring, and shoes, to his younger son. He kisses him again and again. He prepares a banquet. He tells his older son that everything he has is his.

The father wants his children to become sons, to grow into adulthood. He has a clear purpose in mind for his relationship with them, even though he knows how costly that will be. The younger son wants to be a slave but is granted the status of son, and he embraces his sonship. The older son refuses to accept this gift and chooses to remain a slave.

The father rejoices. The anguish he has felt for years only serves to increase his capacity for joy. Three times in chapter 15 we read that when something that is lost is found, that is an occasion for rejoicing:

"...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (7);

"...there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (10);

"Let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found" (24).

This is the same joy that Jesus anticipated, according to the writer of Hebrews: "who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at

the right hand of the throne of God” (12:2).

The story of the prodigal son is the story about the heart of the heavenly Father. “George Buttrick, former chaplain at Harvard, recalls that students would come into his office, plop down on a chair and declare, ‘I don’t believe in God.’ Buttrick would give this disarming reply: ‘Sit down and tell me what kind of God you don’t believe in. I probably don’t believe in that God either.’ And then he would talk about Jesus.” (Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995] 264).

That is what this story does for us: it explains the Father’s love for lost people. It sets out the hardship he is willing to endure so that he might enjoy us. It explains the hardness of our hearts that keeps us from enjoying the Father’s love. It illustrates how difficult it is for us to find home. It speaks of the joy when a son or daughter connects to the heart of the Father.

Now I want to point out a number of spiritual truths from this parable.

First, the ultimate call of our Christian life is to become like the father.

As we grow older, we become more like our earthly fathers and mothers. We look like them, we speak, walk, and dress like them. We tend even to adopt the things that we don’t like about them. If we are God’s children, part of his family, shouldn’t we grow into his likeness as we mature and develop?

This is what John hints at in his first epistle when he talks about three stages in spiritual growth that follow the natural process of human growth: “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake. I am writing to fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you children, because you know the Father” (1 John 2:12-13).

This is what Jesus prayed in the upper room: “I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, are in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me” (John 17:20-21).

Ultimately, our goal is to become like the Father, to be one with the Father and the Son through the Spirit, to share the very heart of God. This means that as we grow and mature, we will offer the kind of grace and love that we see pouring forth from the father in the story of the prodigal son. And when I say father and mother, I am not just thinking of physical seeds. I am speaking of the body of believers, the world in which we live.

In my own spiritual journey, I can relate to the three characters in this parable. In my first twenty years, I, too, like the prodigal son, went to a distant country and squandered all my resources. Then, for the next twenty years, I lived like the older son. I worked hard in the church, but I was not really at home. I was not acting like a son. I refused to enter into the celebration. When I lost both of my parents, I had to deal with the fact that I would never have the kind of relationship with them that I desired. I was never able to acquire the true status of “sonship” in my own family.

But then, as I opened my own heart to my deepest pain, I began to experience my place as a son in my heavenly Father’s embrace. I could hear his voice saying to me, “You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased.” But that wasn’t the end of the journey. As I began to understand my sonship, I felt a deeper call—the call to be like the father in the parable. Now I know that for the next twenty years I will be trying to become like that father, relating to my own children and to others in new ways.

Before we become fathers and mothers, however, we must first become sons and daughters rather than children and slaves. There is no way to short-circuit this process, although we try at times. We work hard putting off the old man, renewing our mind, and putting on the new man. We try to imitate Christ, to be godly. This is all well and good, but if we never fully claim our divine sonship, we will not become fathers and mothers from the heart. We will not be controlled by the Spirit from the inside. We will relate to people like children and slaves. We will live under the law and we won’t be free. But when we become free in our God-given sonship, then we in turn can become healthy mothers and fathers to others.

So the order is crucial. We become sons and daughters, and then we hear the deeper call to become fathers and mothers.

Here is a second principle: Becoming a father is not about power and control; it is about compassion.

Being a father means that your guts will get turned inside out. This is what the word “compassion” means—to be moved deeply in the gut. This is the key word in verse 20. When the father saw his son, he felt compassion, and the actions he took as a result of that were an automatic response of his heart. In fact, “compassion” is one of Luke’s favorite words:

7:13: “When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’”

10:33: “But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion...”

15:20: “So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”

Being a father does not mean you have perfect children and do everything right. It isn’t about order and efficiency. It isn’t about controlling and putting adult children under the law. It isn’t about performance. Sadly, however, some fathers and mothers try to control and humiliate their children, acting out of their own selfish motives. Listen to this story, told by Philip Yancey: “I know of one AIDS patient who traveled eleven hundred miles to be with his family in Michigan for Thanksgiving dinner. He had not seen them in seven years. The parents welcomed him warily, and when dinner was served, everyone got a heaping portion of turkey and all the trimmings on the best Wedgwood china plates—except for their son the AIDS patient, who was served on Chinette, with plastic utensils.” (*The Jesus I Never Knew*, 172).

Being a loving father means having the kind of heart that welcomes home a prodigal, a heart that loves unconditionally. A good father is not threatened when his children act childishly. He never stops initiating. He loves

without holding a grudge. He forgives without resentment. He is generous beyond measure. He believes in his children. His love communicates total acceptance. He listens and does not preach or give unwanted advice. A true father allows his children to become what God wants them to be. As Henri Nouwen writes: "Action with and for those who suffer is the concrete expression of the compassionate life and the final criterion of being a Christian. Such acts do not stand beside the moments of prayer and worship but are themselves such moments...So worship becomes ministry and ministry becomes worship, and all we say or do, ask for or give, becomes a way to the life in which God's compassion can manifest itself." (Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison & Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Compassion* [New York: Doubleday, 1982] 120-121).

Jesus said, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Paul wrote: "And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion..." (Col. 3:12).

Here is our third spiritual principle: Being a father means accepting loneliness.

If compassion means getting your guts ripped apart, you can be sure that your heart will ache. Grief and loneliness are part and parcel of fatherhood. It can be very lonely waiting up for your children to come home at night. It can be very lonely waiting for them to come home from a distant country. It can be painful watching people you love travel the wrong road, getting hurt and disappointed. It is hard to not try and fix their problems.

But in accepting this, we become like our heavenly Father. God knows the kind of ache we feel. Imagine how he felt when he created the first man, Adam, and Adam sinned. I am sure that broke his heart. Did God make a mistake? Did he turn his back? No. He clothed Adam and promised a seed who would bring salvation. All through the Old Testament, we know that God wept over Israel. Over and over, that is the image that is presented to us concerning how the Father related to his son Israel. Think about when he sent his son to a distant country to be beaten and killed. God is a Father who knows loneliness and sorrow.

A godly father is so secure in his relationship with God and so filled with his love that he expects and accepts loneliness. He deals with grief in a godly way. He does not try to make himself a victim. He does not try to push his pain off on other people. He hurts, but he does not take out his hurt on others. A father gives, and even in the midst of pain he does not take. A father doesn't bury his grief, but it doesn't control him, either.

Finally, the joy of a father is blessing others and setting them free.

Divine fatherhood includes both sorrow and joy. He prays. He lets go. He hurts. But he also looks forward to that day when he can relate to his children freely and give them everything he has. His joy is in seeing lost children return home, in having sons and daughters who can love him freely, not as slaves and children. This is God's joy and it can be our joy, too.

Last May, my 21-year-old daughter Sara accompanied our singles group to Yucatan. Knowing that she didn't want my advice, I tried to stay out of her way and let her do what she felt inspired to do. At the end of our visit, we had a time of sharing what God had taught us. After several people had shared, Sara spoke up and expressed her thanks to me as her father. We had our times of trial during her teenage years, so you can appreciate how this was a very moving time for me when she expressed her appreciation of me as her father. I can think of no greater time of joy in my life.

And this kind of joy isn't limited merely to family, it can be experienced in community, with friends and spiritual children. On the cross, Jesus looked at Mary his mother and his disciple John, and said, "Woman, behold, your son!" And he said to his disciple, "Behold, your mother." In our own community there are many children who long for spiritual fathers and mothers. You may have blown it with your own children, but God will give you another chance. You don't have to go anywhere; there is ample opportunity right here. There is nothing more fulfilling than mentoring spiritual children, giving them a taste of the Father's heart, embracing them and helping them grow into the sons and daughters he wants them to become. At the end of your life, you will not want to be remembered for the money you made or the companies you built. Your joy will be remembering the relationships you nurtured.

The call to be a son will lead to the call to be a father. The call to be a daughter will lead to the call to be a mother. The issue is, will you accept the call? Henri Nouwen asks these penetrating questions: "Do I want to be like the father? Do I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home, but also the one who welcomes home; not just the one who receives compassion, but the one who offers it as well?" (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 122).

Do you want to be the kind of man or woman who greets a sinner in a bus station with a sign that says "Welcome Home"?

© 1998 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino