

## **“A Godly Father”**

**June 17, 2007**

**Dr. Kipp Wolfe**

Luke 15:11-32

Did you know that throughout this city today, throughout this area of Northeast Oklahoma, throughout the state of Oklahoma and across the nation, there are fathers who would not be caught dead in a worship service. It's not that they're doing something with their family or that they have other plans for this day. They just don't have anything to do with church. So the first word on this Father's Day 2007 is this: I am grateful for you fathers who are present here, for your faith, for sharing your faith with your families. I would ask that the fathers who are present at this time would stand, if you will. Would all of you fathers stand, please? Thank you.

Nothing like receiving a sitting ovation, is there?

That reflects some of our ambivalent feelings about fathers. We hear a lot about dads today, and much of what we hear is not good. We hear about absent fathers, fathers who are not there for their children. We hear about fathers who are simply detached. They live under the same roof with their children, but they might as well live miles away, because they are detached. They're not there for their children. In the past few years, the phrase “deadbeat dads” has said something to us about some dads who care nothing at all for their children. So we have ambivalent feelings about our fathers. Fathers get blamed for some things that maybe they should or should not be blamed for. If you're a dad, how would you feel if you were Paris Hilton's father on this Father's Day? Just think about that.

Some of you might have heard this: On Mother's Day, there are more long-distance calls made in this country than on any other day of the year. Did you know that on Father's Day there are more collect calls made than on any other day of the year?

I'm not making this up. I saw this book title recently that explains some of our ambivalent feelings toward fathers - “Mama, quick, get a hammer! There's a fly on daddy's head!”

Some of you have heard this story, and I'll apologize ahead of time if you have. One father and husband was not feeling well, so he went to see the doctor. His wife went with him. After the doctor had examined the man, he came back in and asked the wife if he could speak with her privately. The woman and the doctor went into the doctor's office, just the two of them, and he explained something about the serious nature of her husband's illness. But he said “He can still have several good years if you do some things. The woman said, “What do I need to do?” The

doctor said to the woman, “He needs to eat healthy – a hearty breakfast, a nutritious lunch, and a hot supper every day. You need to take good care of the house; keep it spotless to avoid germs collecting; and he shouldn’t have any stress, so don’t bother him about doing things. The woman heard all of this, and on the way home, the husband was understandably curious about what the doctor had said. He asked his wife, and she turned to him with tear-filled eyes and said, “Honey, you gonna die!”

Father’s Day can be a painful day for some persons. Some persons don’t have a good relationship with their fathers. Some persons don’t have any relationship at all. Even if a father has been dead for several years, just stirring up those memories can be painful for some people. There are some men who want to be fathers and, for whatever reason, cannot. So with all of this in mind, we come and read this wonderful parable, The Parable of the Prodigal Son or the Loving Father, my favorite among all of the parables. Not only in Biblical literature but in all of literature, this might be one of the greatest short stories we have.

We love this story because we recognize the people in the story. We recognize something of the younger brother, because we recognize ourselves in the story. How many of us have not rebelled and gone our own way, and, hopefully, at some point in our lives, like the younger brother, we have “come to ourselves” and realized that there is a price to be paid for our sinfulness.

In the church, we would do well to admit that there is something of the older brother in each of us. We can often adopt that “holier than thou” attitude and be judgmental of those persons who are outside of the church. Many biblical commentators say it is no secret that the church sees itself in the attitude of the older brother.

Hopefully, we can see something of the father in ourselves. He wasn’t perfect. He made mistakes, but he did the best he could as a father. He did some very specific things with his sons. He let go of his sons. The older brother didn’t realize that or didn’t admit it. The younger brother did and he took advantage of it. That’s something we all need to do as parents. Mothers are accused of having apron strings that are too long, but through the years, I have known as many or more men who had difficulty in letting go of their children. This father let go of his son.

He listened to his sons. When his sons came to him, both of them, he didn’t say “Shut up and listen to me!” He listened to what they had to say and took seriously what they said.

Did you notice that he looked at his sons? My favorite part of the parable is when Luke says, “While the younger son was still at a great distance, his father saw him and ran to him.” We have this picture of this old man sitting on his front porch, waiting, looking, watching for his son to return.

And he forgave his sons, both of them. The old preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, talks

about this forgiveness. He says,

“There is just one thing forgiveness does, one thing only. Forgiveness does not take away the fact of sin. The Prodigal had still been away in the far country. Forgiveness doesn’t take away the memory of sin. Neither the Prodigal nor the father will ever forget. Forgiveness does not and cannot take away the consequences of sin. The one thing forgiveness does, is reestablish old relationships that had been broken by sin.”

I know this about those of you who are present here today: Some of you were fortunate to be blessed with a loving family. You love your parents, you love your children. If that’s the case for you, you can give thanks to God. Most of us take that for granted. We think that’s how it is for everyone, but it’s not. Just as much, I know this: I know there are many of you present here this morning who have broken relationships with your own family members. Maybe it’s with parents who have been dead for years. Maybe you are not speaking to a grown child or to a brother or a sister. One of the saddest things in my ministry is when people come to me and say, “I haven’t spoken to my son in years,” or, “I haven’t spoken to my mother in years.” “My brother moved away, he lives miles away from the rest of the family. He’s kind of cut himself off from the rest of us.” If that’s true in your family, you need to, today, not tomorrow or next week, begin to do something to see that reconciliation takes place, that forgiveness takes place within your own heart.

We love this parable, as we love most parables, because the parables are real. They are taken from real things that happen, the very stuff of life. It’s not hard to imagine that, one day when Jesus was teaching and told a parable about a sower, he looked across the way and saw a sower sowing and said, “Look, a sower went out to sow....” Then he told that story. It’s possible that when Jesus told this parable of the Prodigal Son and the Loving Father some of his listeners knew this family. This isn’t a made-up story, it’s a true-life story. It’s our story. That’s why we love it so. It’s not, however, about a God who is like this father. It’s about a father who is like God.

Did you notice that this imperfect father teaches us something important about the love of God? I love what one writer has said about this parable.

“There are many sad things in this world; to live your life in repetitive, self-defeating behaviors, running from God and from self and from anybody who might know you, living and hiding and never coming home. But perhaps this is the saddest, to try to buy what can only be given, to try to earn what is yours already, to search the world over for a treasure that is buried in your own back yard, to live forever trying to earn God’s love and never discover that it is a gift as free as the sun that shines, as free as the rain that falls from the skies.”

On this Father’s Day, it is my prayer for all of you fathers, and for all of you, that you will receive and share this blessed gift of God’s love. Amen.