

Fathergod
June 15, 2003
Wedgewood Baptist Church
Charlotte, North Carolina
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Ancient Testimony:

Mark 15:3-7 (Cotton Patch Gospels, by Clarence Jordan)

Is there a man among you who, if he has a hundred sheep and loses one of them, will not leave the ninety-nine in the pasture and go hunt for the lost one? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home with it. He calls over to his friends and neighbors, "Hey, y'all, I found my sheep. Isn't that wonderful?" I'm telling you, in the same way there'll be more joy among the spiritually sensitive ones over a single "outsider" who reshapes his life than over the ninety-nine "righteous" people who don't need to change their ways.

Mark 15:8-10 (Cotton Patch Gospels, by Clarence Jordan)

Or suppose a woman has ten dimes and loses one of them; won't she get the flashlight and a broom and sweep and look carefully till she finds it? And when she does find it, she calls over to her friends and neighbors and says, "Hey, y'all, you know that dime I lost? Well, I found it. Isn't that nice?" In the same way, I tell you, there's a rejoicing on the part of God's faithful ones over a single "outsider" who re-shapes his life.

Mark 15:11-32 (New Revised Standard Version)

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry. "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants

and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

Modern Testimony:

"Father" (from *Whistling in the Dark*, by Frederick Buechner)

When a child is born, a father is born. A mother is born too, of course, but at least for her it's a gradual process. Body and soul, she has nine months to get used to what's happening. She becomes what's happening. But for even the best-prepared father, it happens all at once. On the other side of the plate-glass window, a nurse is holding up something roughly the size of a loaf of bread for him to see for the first time. Even if he should decide to abandon it forever ten minutes later, the memory will nag him to the grave. He has seen the creation of the world. It has his mark upon it. He has its mark upon him. Both marks are, for better or worse, indelible.

All sons, like all daughters, are prodigals if they're smart. Assuming the Old Man doesn't run out on them first, they will run out on him if they are to survive, and if he's smart he won't put up too much of a fuss. A wise father sees all this coming, and maybe that's why he keeps his distance from the start. He must survive, too. Whether they ever find their way home again, none can say for sure, but it's the risk he must take if they're ever to find their way at all. In the meantime, the world tends to have a soft spot in its heart for lost children. Lost fathers have to fend for themselves.

Even as the father lays down the law, he knows that someday his children will break it as they need to break it if ever they're to find something better than law to replace it. Until and unless that happens, there's no telling the scrapes they will get into trying to lose him and find themselves. Terrible blunders will be made – disappointments and failures, hurts and losses of every kind. And they'll keep making them even after they've found themselves too, of course, because growing up is a process that goes on and on. And every hard knock they ever get knocks the father even harder still if that's possible, and if and when they finally come through more or less in one piece at the end, there's maybe no rejoicing greater than his in all creation.

It has become so commonplace to speak of God as "our Father" that we forget what an extraordinary metaphor it once was.

TEXT:

When I have been in conservative christian gatherings, in addition to feeling very uncomfortable, I have also often been annoyed by the tendency of some to refer to God as "Fathergod" ... as

though it was one word and a proper name. “Fathergod, we just thank you for just being so just....”

I realize that we do not all agree on this issue, but most of you are fully aware that I strongly agree that the use of inclusive language is a good thing; that our references to each other or to God should not be overwhelmingly masculine – or feminine. And in that, I relish my delusion that those who so adamantly resist inclusive language must look upon me as a cat might upon a king because of my ability to see the value and validity of multiple metaphors in reference to divinity. God is mother. God is father. God is a protective hen. God is a soaring eagle. Etc.

If I tend to use feminine metaphors more often than I use masculine metaphors, I feel fairly secure in my evaluation that there are many more folks out there who use exclusively masculine images of God who more than make up for my error to the left. But that doesn’t mean that I think it’s okay to toss out the proverbial baby with the bath water.

I suspect that there are many of us here who did not – or perhaps do not – have the most spectacular relationships with our fathers. The fathers we know from our homes are, after all, human beings, as fragile or more than all other human beings. Jewish and Christian scriptures are replete with examples of fathers I’d rather not compare with God: Abraham ready to sacrifice Isaac and his disavowal of Ishmael after Isaac’s birth, Jacob’s unblushing preference of Rachel’s children over Leah’s, Lot’s incest with his daughters, and how about Jephthah and the terror he inflicted on his daughter. God as father like that?? No thanks. But no metaphor is perfect and the metaphor of God as Mother brings with it just as many potential negative reactions due to our experiences of our own mothers or our knowledge of various biblical mothers. For instance, where was Jephthah’s wife????

Jesus followed – some say introduced – a radical concept when he continually referred to God familiarly as “father”. The Aramaic word is “Abba” – which some have said is actually better translated as “daddy” than “father”. It was a word for father that was used familiarly within the context of home. Dad, papa, daddy. In the text we heard today as the modern testimony from Frederick Buechner’s writings, Buechner points out that once, long ago, in a far away place, using the metaphor of father to refer to the almighty God was an extraordinary thing to do. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus sobs through his tears, “Abba, father, for you all things are possible. Remove this cup from me....” (Mark 14:36) “Daddy – help me; save me.”

Buechner says that it is so commonplace to use the metaphoric language “Father” for God that we have forgotten what it means. And that is clearly so. Christians, on the whole, focus on a vengeful, punishing father to whom justice is at least as important as mercy. Most Christians worship an accountant Fathergod whose debits and credits must be made to balance before any reward is extended to the debtors.

So let me direct your attention again to the parable Jesus tells as relayed to us by the writer of the Gospel of Luke. In Luke, Jesus has just told two other parables. In each, he describes the actions of a human being in response to the loss of a small portion of wealth. A shepherd loses one sheep out of ninety-nine. Does he just write it off and think he can probably deduct it as a casualty on his income tax?? No, he leaves the ninety-nine and goes and finds the lost sheep and then

rejoices at reclaiming the sheep. The same with the woman who loses money. She searches until she finds it and then rejoices in the reclamation. These parables are not unlike the earlier statement Jesus makes – “Is there anyone among you, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ... If you then, who are evil [base, fragile] know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly father give....?” (Luke 11:11-13) These are metaphors of God and the Realm of God by which Jesus implies that God seeks us when we are not with God. That our absence from God creates a vacuum – a desire on the part of divinity to find us and restore us to relationship.

And then, Jesus moves to an altogether different type of metaphor. It is popularly called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son” because we – at least the men, I suppose – readily identify with the younger son wanting to break away and see the world. But it is equally correct to refer to it as “The Parable of the Loving Father” – or “The Parable of the Angry Brother.” The story is full of very intense and meaningful content and a shotgun sermon on every aspect of it would take forever and, in the end, convey nothing by trying to address all. Instead, I would like you to focus on one small scene in the narrative – the return of the younger son.

Let me set the scene a bit first, however. The younger son asked the father to divvy up the estate and give him his share. Many of the commentators I referenced state that in ancient Palestine, this was the equivalent of saying to the father, “You are dead to me.” The younger son wants to skip ahead and pretend that the father is dead and that the will is being read. The younger son has taken the money and run and as far as we know from the story the father has not heard from or about the son since he left the family farm. One more piece of information – the commentators say that running, showing emotion like the father does, was most undignified and demeaning in ancient Palestine.

And so, I hope you can see how very extraordinary the father’s actions are. I picture the scene this way. The father is sitting on the front porch in a rocking chair, looking off into the distance. He’s thinking about his younger son. He thinks about him every day. His absence, his loss is more than the father can bear. He hasn’t heard from or about his younger son in all the time he’s been gone and, though he tries to be hopeful, dread stalks his heart. Is his son alive? Is he well? Has he fallen prey to the myriad terrors the ancient world had to offer – slavery, illness, leprosy, extreme poverty?

Then in the middle of those passive ruminations, off in the distance, just starting down the drive – just past the mailbox walking between the waving fields of wheat – a visitor approaches. At first the figure in the distance holds the father’s attention because a guest in those times was a matter of importance. The father is thinking of the things he needs to do to make a guest welcome – he is about to call for a servant to begin preparations when something about the figure suddenly becomes familiar. Something about the gait, the demeanor, the carriage of the lone figure in the distance resonates in his memory. Instant hope mixes with rampant adrenaline. Could it be...? The father walks down off the porch toward the drive. He walks toward the approaching man, still far away. With each step, the father becomes more and more convinced that a miracle walks slowly toward him. He begins to trot – then run. He yells out the boy’s name. The son in his shame walks slowly forward, but the father never stops running until he reaches his son. He has set aside all thought of social rules, personal dignity. All that is

important to him is to have his son back. He reaches his son, embraces him and kisses him. When the son attempts to set the terms of his return – to be treated as a slave – the father interrupts. The father calls for clothes and luxuries. He sets the servants scurrying to prepare a party to celebrate his good fortune – for if misery loves company, joy craves a crowd.

Who is this father? He isn't me. He isn't most fathers I know. He isn't concerned with hearing an apology first. He doesn't insist on retribution or vengeance. He doesn't stop to make it clear to the younger son that he's gotten all he's going to get. I really can't think of this loving father as other than a metaphor for God.

The most extraordinary thing about this parabolic Fathergod – at least for me – is that he is not described in theological terms. He is not defined by rules or beliefs. He is not love – he loves. He is not patience – he waits. This Fathergod is a verb – described and incarnated not by concepts like justice or mercy – but by his actions. This Fathergod waits on the porch. Watches the horizon. And most extraordinarily of all – runs the length of the long drive to embrace and kiss his son he thought was lost to him forever. This Fathergod proceeds to celebrate the younger son's return lavishly. There is no retribution. There is no justice. There is no mercy even. There is simply joy. This is a Fathergod to worship.

Last week, Chris talked about what a dangerous day Pentecost is – or at least should be – for Christians. Chris spoke about how Christians have made the church their focus when their focus should be the world. He talked about how Christians wait inside the walls for “sinners” to come in and how we should be thinking instead of how we can enter the world.

The Fathergod of the parable does not wait inside, but outside. He doesn't wait for the figure on the road to make a request. He doesn't keep his seat or his dignity – he runs with reckless abandon, with joyful fleetness to kiss his restored son.

It seems to me that part of our consideration of Chris's challenge as he presented it last week, is to consider what it means for us to emulate the loving, watchful father of the parable. Will we be the angry brother? I didn't talk about him – there's too much to consider for one sermon. No. Not us, I hope. But can we be the loving father? Here we are watching and waiting. Do we have the vision to see what's coming down the road toward us – and do we have the love, and the courage, to run pell mell down the road to embrace it.

Amen.

The Buddhist Parable

A young man left his father and ran away. For long he dwelt in other countries, for ten, or twenty, or fifty years. The older he grew, the more needy he became. Wandering in all directions to seek clothing and food, he unexpectedly approached his native country. The father had searched for his son all those years in vain and meanwhile had settled in a certain city. His home became very rich; his goods and treasures were fabulous.

At this time, the poor son, wandering through village after village and passing through countries and cities, at last reached the city where his father had settled. The father had always been thinking of his son, yet, although he had been parted from him over fifty years, he had never spoken of the matter to anyone. He only pondered over it within himself and cherished regret in his heart, saying, "Old and worn out I am. Although I own much wealth - gold, silver, and jewels, granaries and treasuries overflowing - I have no son. Some day my end will come and my wealth will be scattered and lost, for I have no heir. If I could only get back my son and commit my wealth to him, how contented and happy would I be, with no further anxiety!"

Meanwhile the poor son, hired for wages here and there, unexpectedly arrived at his father's house. Standing by the gate, he saw from a distance his father seated on a lion-couch, his feet on a jeweled footstool, and with expensive strings of pearls adorning his body, revered and surrounded by priests, warriors, and citizens, attendants and young slaves waiting upon him right and left. The poor son, seeing his father having such great power, was seized with fear, regretting that he had come to this place. He reflected, "This must be a king, or someone of royal rank, it is impossible for me to be hired here. I had better go to some poor village in search of a job, where food and clothing are easier to get. If I stay here long, I may suffer oppression." Reflecting thus, he rushed away.

Meanwhile the rich elder on his lion-seat had recognized his son at first glance, and with great joy in his heart reflected, "Now I have someone to whom I may pass on my wealth. I have always been thinking of my son, with no means of seeing him, but suddenly he himself has come and my longing is satisfied. Though worn with years, I yearn for him."

Instantly he sent off his attendants to pursue the son quickly and fetch him back. Immediately the messengers hasten forth to seize him. The poor son, surprised and scared, loudly cried his complaint, "I have committed no offense against you, why should I be arrested?" The messengers all the more hastened to lay hold of him and brought him back. Following that, the poor son, thought that although he was innocent he would be imprisoned, and that now he would surely die. He became all the more terrified, fainted away and fell on the ground. The father, seeing this from a distance, sent word to the messengers, "I have no need for this man. Do not bring him by force. Sprinkle cold water on his face to restore him to consciousness and do not speak to him any further." Why? The father, knowing that his son's disposition was inferior, knowing that his own lordly position had caused distress to his son, yet convinced that he was his son, tactfully did not say to others, "This is my son."

A messenger said to the son, "I set you free, go wherever you will." The poor son was delighted, thus obtaining the unexpected release. He arose from the ground and went to a poor village in search of food and clothing. Then the elder, desiring to attract his son, set up a device. Secretly he sent two men, sorrowful and poor in appearance, saying, "Go and visit that place and gently say to the poor man, 'There is a place for you to work here. We will hire you for scavenging, and we both also will work along with you.'" Then the two messengers went in search of the poor son and, having found him, presented him the above proposal. The poor son, having received his wages in advance, joined them in removing a refuse heap.

His father, beholding the son, was struck with compassion for him. One day he saw at a distance, through the window, his son's figure, haggard and drawn, lean and sorrowful, filthy with dirt and dust. He took off his strings of jewels, his soft attire, and put on a coarse, torn and dirty garment, smeared his body with dust, took a basket in his right hand, and with an appearance fear-inspiring said to the laborers, "Get on with your work, don't be lazy." By such means he got near to his son, to whom he afterwards said, "Ay, my man, you stay and work here, do not leave again. I will increase your wages, give whatever you need, bowls, rice, wheat-flour, salt, vinegar, and so on. Have no hesitation; besides there is an old servant whom you can get if you need him. Be at ease in your mind; I am, as it were, your father; do not be worried again. Why? I am old and advanced in years, but you are young and vigorous; all the time you have been working, you have never been deceitful, lazy, angry or grumbling. I have never seen you, like the other laborers, with such vices as these. From this time forth you will be as my own begotten son."

The elder gave him a new name and called him a son. But the poor son, although he rejoiced at this happening, still thought of himself as a humble hireling. For this reason, for twenty years he continued to be employed in scavenging. After this period, there grew mutual confidence between the father and the son. He went in and out and at his ease, though his abode was still in a small hut.

Then the father became ill and, knowing that he would die soon, said to the poor son, "Now I possess an abundance of gold, silver, and precious things, and my granaries and treasuries are full to overflowing. I want you to understand in detail the quantities of these things, and the amounts that should be received and given. This is my wish, and you must agree to it. Why? Because now we are of the same mind. Be increasingly careful so that there be no waste." The poor son accepted his instruction and commands, and became acquainted with all the goods. However, he still had no idea of expecting to inherit anything, his abode was still the original place and he was still unable to abandon his sense of inferiority.

After a short time had again passed, the father noticed that his son's ideas had gradually been enlarged, his aspirations developed, and that he despised his previous state of mind. Seeing that his own end was approaching, he commanded his son to come, and gathered all his relatives, the kings, priests, warriors, and citizens. When they were all assembled, he addressed them saying, "Now, gentlemen, this is my son, begotten by me. It is over fifty years since, from a certain city, he left me and ran away to endure loneliness and misery. His former name was so-and-so and my name was so-and-so. At that time in that city I sought him sorrowfully. Suddenly I met him in this place and regained him. This is really my son and I am really his father. Now all the wealth which I possess belongs entirely to my son, and all my previous disbursements and receipts are known by this son." When the poor son heard these words of his father, great was his joy at such unexpected news, and thus he thought, "Without any mind for, or effort on my part, these treasures now come to me."

World-honored One! The very rich elder is the Tathagata, and we are all as the Buddha's sons. The Buddha has always declared that we are his sons. But because of the three sufferings, in the midst of births-and-deaths we have borne all kinds of torments, being deluded and ignorant and enjoying our attachment to things of no value. Today the World-honored One has caused us to ponder over and remove the dirt of all diverting discussions of inferior things. In these we have

hitherto been diligent to make progress and have got, as it were, a day's pay for our effort to reach nirvana. Obtaining this, we greatly rejoiced and were contented, saying to ourselves, "For our diligence and progress in the Buddha-law what we have received is ample". The Buddha, knowing that our minds delighted in inferior things, by his tactfulness taught according to our capacity, but still we did not perceive that we are really Buddha's sons. Therefore we say that though we had no mind to hope or expect it, yet now the Great Treasure of the King of the Law has of itself come to us, and such things that Buddha-sons should obtain, we have all obtained.

(Saddharmapundarika Sutra 4)