

## ***A Father's Love***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

June 18, 2023 – FATHER'S DAY

Text: Luke 15: 18-24

My dad was one of a kind. Of course, I think we all think that about our dads, if we are fortunate enough to have had fathers with whom we had positive, even wonderful, relationships. Certainly, that is not true for everyone. I am keenly aware of this. I know that for those folks the idea of celebrating “Father’s Day” is a painful one. I appreciate that and I grieve for them for a loss of a unique relationship so foundational to one’s life. I think we all know folks for whom a loving and involved relationship with their father remains an unrealized dream. Far more than we realize, in fact. The truth is that not all men are invested in being fathers, just as not all women are not invested in being mothers. Parenthood requires sacrifices, a lot of them. It also requires more patience than any of us have, truthfully. I personally believe no one has endless patience with their children through all the phases of life. It begins with lack of sleep when they are babies, lack of privacy and alone time when they are toddlers and elementary school age children. This continues on with a lack of sanity when dealing with tweens, teenagers and college age kids as they become increasingly convinced they have all the answers and you as their parent know less than nothing. Even after college, they return home unsure of next steps in life even as they are equally sure you could not possibly have any idea what it’s like to be them. Of course, you don’t. You’re dad after all.

This is when dads really show up – when their kids least want them to be around, which is also when their presence is needed most. But how to do this deftly? How to do this without blowing the whole relationship sky high? Well, often this is not possible. This is when

that most important Dad trait must be present, for everyone's sake. No, I'm not talking about dad jokes, though those are important. What's left, you ask? Simple. Love, unconditional love. Anyone who has parented teenagers and lived to tell the tale has some idea of what unconditional love is. Unconditional love is not screaming the first time the car comes back with a huge dent but an intact teenage driver. Unconditional love is hoping that very same teenager learned a lesson from that valuable if terrifying situation. Unconditional love is pushing to know where your kids are going, especially when they don't want dad to know for fear he'll show up if they are late for curfew. Unconditional love is dad taking on a second or even a third job to cover those college expenses which have become absolutely ridiculous. Unconditional love encourages that potentially wayward child to do what they want to do instead of what dad thinks makes more sense as a career. Yikes. That's a tough one!

I could go on but I'm sure you have your own examples. The idea here is that being a dad basically requires a lot of what most of us do not have a lot of – patience, money, creativity, time, etc. And yet, somehow, dads find a way to deliver for their kids – the best they can. Remember me saying my dad was one of a kind? He truly was. Interestingly, though my two brothers and I experienced our dad in very different ways. Is that true in your family? Sure was in mine. Perhaps this was because I was the youngest by eight years and the only girl. Perhaps it's because my dad's interactions with me were also different because when my brothers were little he was working in the rolling mills of US Steel as a laborer. The year I was born, shortly after he finally received his night-school degree in metallurgical engineering, dad was promoted out of the mill and into the white collar world of the steel business. What this meant was that when I was growing up, my dad was on the road most of every week for work

since his job was to visit US Steel customers who were experiencing problems with the steel they had purchased for whatever they were using it to produce. This meant dad was not home most weeknights and when he was home on the weekends, his days were filled with all the stuff he couldn't get to on the days he was on the road.

When my brothers were young, dad was still working swing shifts in the mill, so he was available to be their little league coach. He was around to play catch with them in the yard. He was there for them day to day in a way he never was able to be for me. Yet, I had the better relationship with him as we grew up. My brothers insisted it was because dad was super strict with them in a way he wasn't with me. Maybe. But I don't recall either of them saying dad had told them they couldn't engage in a school activity because of the uniform it required. My dad said no to cheerleading and flag corps because of the "short skirts." The funny thing about this is that my dad was also the one who told me over and over again that I could be anything I wanted, that I should set my sights for a career high and never give up until I achieved what I wanted. He pushed me. He encouraged me. He made me believe in myself, as myself. He taught me what it meant to be a person with integrity, a person whose word meant something, a person who knew how to love and still let go when it was time. Based on our adult conversations long after dad's death, I'm pretty sure my brothers did not experience dad in this same way. Perhaps they were too headstrong? Too worried about being drafted into Vietnam? Too worried about escaping childhood as quickly as possible? I don't know. I do know that it makes me sad sometimes to know the things about dad they never knew.

This lens of my relationship with my dad is always the lens through which I consider this well-known biblical story we are considering on this Father's Day. There are certainly lots of stories

about fathers in the Bible which we could choose as our focus today: Abraham and Isaac. Jacob and Joseph. David and Solomon. Joseph and Jesus. Zebedee, James, and John. But today, I want us to take a look at this lovely parable Jesus told about a father, even though it's generally known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Found only in the Gospel of Luke, this parable is actually about two sons and their father. The prodigal son is the primary character and has evolved over the centuries to be the archetype of the younger, miscreant son who squanders everything his father has given him and then slinks back home. The other son, the older one, also plays an important if secondary role in the story as the responsible one, the one who stays and works hard to do all that his father expected only to see the miscreant welcomed home with open arms. He is not happy about this, to put it mildly.

Usually, when we consider this parable, we focus on one of the sons. Our focus on the younger, wilder son who loses everything and then slinks back home professing he will be content just to work for his father tends to lead to reflections on how our Heavenly Father – God – will forgive us our sins if only we repent. There is nothing we can do that will separate us from God's love, except ourselves of course. Or, if our focus is on the older, responsible son, our reflections tend more in the direction of all the times we become jealous or upset when someone else receives the credit for something we do routinely and without acknowledgement. In this case, the father – God – once again expresses his unconditional love for the son who never left. Interesting in these considerations is that we never actually hear how the older son responds to his father's reassurances. Instead, the story ends with the father reminding the older brother that they must rejoice because the one who was lost has been found. This ending of course leads us to the conclusion about the great

rejoicing in heaven when even one sinner repents. Still, what does it mean that we never hear the older son's response? Did he agree, or not? Did he stay around, or was he so angry he then left? I think those are questions Jesus intentionally left unanswered, so we need to ponder them more deeply ourselves.

All that being said, today I would like us to stop a moment and think about the father in this parable. And I'd like us to think about him not as a symbol for God in this symbolic story but instead as the character he portrays in this story – a father with two sons, a man with kids who are making him crazy. What do we know about this man? We know he was wealthy and well established. We know he employed others since the younger son knew his father took care of his hired hands better than what he was experiencing working for others content to let him starve. We know the father was generous and thoughtful. He was able to, and did, divide his property in such a way that he could honor the younger son's request to take his share and take off to make his own way in the world. We know he was willing to allow this son to do this – an outrageous thing to do even in Jesus' time. We don't know if the father attempted to talk him out of it, but clearly, even if he tried, it didn't work. And when it didn't he sent his son off with love, and no doubt a huge lump in his throat and a sinking sensation in his stomach. We know that when this very same son slinked back, starving and broke, months later, the father welcomed him back with open arms, even to the point of ordering a celebration for the whole family. We know he soon realized the older son was upset by all this and he sought this son out to find out if he was okay. When he realized this son was not okay, he tried to comfort him with an explanation.

In short, what we know about this father – this man with two sons and we don't know how many daughters (that's a different

sermon) – is that he loved his children. He loved them so much that he did all that he could to provide for them while they were living with him and even when they left him. And we know one more very important thing about him that is implied in the story but never directly acknowledged. We know that his sons – his children – *knew* their father loved them. They knew they were loved unconditionally, beyond all reason. The younger son knew he was loved so much that he felt he could ask for his inheritance and receive it. He also knew, when all was said and done, and he was broke and starving, that his father would welcome him back in some capacity – even if only as a hired hand. He knew his father loved him and that knowledge, the greatest gift his father could give him, was still in his possession. We also know that the older son knew he was loved by this father which is why he was so shocked and hurt when his father – this man he had loved and respected all his life – did something he could not understand. The older son could not comprehend that his beloved father could just forgive the miscreant younger son. He didn't understand it and, because of how this parable ends, we don't know that he ever understood it. We don't know if his father's unconditional love for him was enough for him in the end.

I suspect it was. I suspect it was because this kind of love can, and does, overcome hurt and anger and the pain they bring with them. That's what this whole story is about, after all. Love. A father's unconditional, even unreasonable, love for two sons who could not be more different and yet he loved them both the same. And it's also about God's love for us as equally unconditional and, dare I say, unreasonable. Come on, we know how we act when we think no one is watching or listening. We know all those times we do not do as we would like but the very thing we should not do is what we end up doing. The Apostle Paul reminds us of that. We are human after all.

We get angry, feel cheated, resent others whom we think do not deserve what they receive. We are quick to judge others and slow to change our own shortcomings if we even take the time to consider them. And yet, still, God loves us, beyond all reason.

This unconditional, unreasonable love is the real message of Father's Day. This is what we are celebrating – it's presence in our lives if we are truly blessed and the hope for it if that has not been the case. I hope you had a dad or someone like a dad to you that gave you a hint of what it means to be loved unconditionally and unreasonably. If you did not, it's never too late to do some reflecting on who that person – that loving “like dad” could have been, perhaps still is, for you. I also hope that you are generous enough to share that love with others in your life so that they can experience some sense of what unconditional love looks like. If you are blessed with your own kids – love them beyond all reason. If not, share your love with kids and adults who need it so desperately by volunteering with community organizations or your own extended family. Dads and like dads, share that love deep in your heart, that love which wells up from the knowledge of how much God loves you.

The unconditional, unreasonable love of a man for his own children or for others desperately in need of such love. That is God's call to all men, and women too. Impossible? Never! With God all things are possible! Even loving when it makes no sense. Happy Father's Day. Amen.