

Sermon OBUC Father's Day June 21, 2020.

Luke:15;11-24

I took the liberty of changing the assigned scripture text, mostly because today I wanted to honour two groups of people, Fathers and our Indigenous kin, many of course who are also fathers. It is after all Father's day and National Indigenous People's day

In the fall of 2010, I had the privilege, albeit, the difficult privilege, of being a witness at the Forks in Winnipeg, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. Our task was just to be listeners, these were some of the most emotionally difficult days of my life.

There we heard from many Fathers and Grandfathers, all Residential school survivors telling their stories, some for the very first time in their entire lives. Their shame and their pain had been too great but being in the circle they found the courage to speak, it was heart rendering. Many of these men, sobbing told how they had not only been addicted but had emotionally, physically and in some cases sexually abused their wives and children . Their own childhood experiences and lack of parenting skills never far from their minds. I heard several men publicly apologize to their wives and kids, they were powerful and profound moments.

I recommitted that day to always strive for justice and speak out about racism in all forms. The struggle is ongoing

I also wanted to honour Fathers on their special day.

For today's message I looked up a lot of scripture associated with Fathers but many of them are about judgement and punishment and others were advice for Fathers, usually about how to treat and raise their children. For instance in the book of Proverbs, it tells fathers to "Raise up a child in the way he should go"... etc.

From Ephesians 6:4 'And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord'.

There are also several Father/Child stories in both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, maybe you could do some homework this week and see how many of those stories you can find.

I really like the stories in the Christian scriptures especially of Fathers talking to Jesus or in some instances begging Jesus to come to heal their children. The Centurion, the Temple Leader whose daughter lies dying; tender stories of fairly powerful men seeking out this controversial, itinerant preacher, who was stirring up such unrest and anxiety in the extremely powerful Roman and Temple Leaders, in whose service both of these men were employed.

Then of course the story that Lawrie read for us of the Prodigal Son a compelling story of a father's unconditional love.

It is the father not the wayward boy I want to focus on.

Faith is wrapped up in a huge serving of God's love, and in the love displayed in this parable of a broken hearted father and his prodigal son.

The father's love, like God's love, never gives up!

This really is an incredible story, because this elderly man would have had to go to great lengths to accommodate his youngest son's request. Obeying Levitical laws about inheritances would really have complicated things. The father in our scripture would not have had lawyer's making long distant phone calls and transferring money into the son's bank account. This devoted father would have had to go to the trouble of changing titles of holdings, dividing and selling livestock and handing over probably a large amount of cash. He couldn't just go to an ATM either or give his son a card to do that. Jesus tells us in the story he somehow acquires the boy's inheritance and hands it over.

The word inheritance means receiving something after '**the death**' of a loved one in the form of a bequest.

Some people have been lucky enough to receive a surprise inheritance from someone unknown or a distant family member. I think I have told you my 'inheritance' story before but I will tell it again

I received such a call many years ago from a British law firm saying we had been left a sum of money in the will of a distant, hardly remembered relative!

I immediately planned a trip around the world and of course a new wardrobe and a 'Morgan' sports car, only to receive months later the sum of, I think once, lawyer's fees and conversion to Canadian dollars was complete our 'inheritance' was just enough to take our three children for a rare treat to the A&W at Lockport; where, incidentally, a very, large, live 'Root Bear' scared the life out of my very sweet, shy, little son and the whole incident did not go into the 'good' memory bank, neither did any inheritance!!

But I digress....

Imagine if you will each day, the aging father in the story looking out over the road leading from his land as his eyesight fails squinting into the sunlight to see if this boy will one day come back down that same road on which he took off, and low and behold, his old almost blind eyes see the vision he has longed for.

What Jewish father, whose honour has been insulted, by his son's request, breaks up the ancestral lands to give his lazy, spoiled boy a massive cash inheritance?

What is Jesus trying to tell us, it is a little different from the scriptures of the Old Testament that speaks of sparing the rod and spoiling the child, isn't it?

There is a lovely little book by Henry Nouwen called 'The Return of the Prodigal', Based on the painting Jaime put up on the screen for us.

I would be happy to loan it to anyone who would like to read it.

Nouwen became fascinated with Rembrandt's portrait of the story and he describes his feeling after studying this masterpiece and has some wonderful insights into the artist interpretation and into the heart of God that he sees in the father.

He has many insights into the expressions, the posture, especially the father's hands, where he identifies strength in one, firmly holding on to his son and gentleness in the other in a tender caress.

In those hands he sees both the masculine and feminine side of God's relationship, not only to the prodigal son but to each one of us.

The painter Rembrandt was no stranger to heart ache so his depiction of this aging, emotional, hurt, yet forgiving father speaks to him profoundly as the ever welcoming Creator and for Rembrandt, Father and God (but a God as I already mentioned with both male and female attributes.)

In this short yet profound book, we are challenged to see ourselves in all the characters in the story and like Nouwen if we take the time to do so, no doubt we can find ourselves reflected in any of the three major characters in this parable of Jesus.

This is actually what God our father/ creator offers, we are continually wrapped in arms of love, and like the prodigal son are offered new life in a joyful, re-shaped, revised, renewed relationship.

May we want it, may we claim it, may we believe it, may we live it.

And may those of you still fortunate enough to have your earthy father hold on fast to his tender and loving embrace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Maureen McCartney