

## Parable of the Prodigal Son

Seeing how it's Father's Day, I figured I should say a few words about parenthood. Being a parent is a tough job. With children come the greatest joy, but also the greatest responsibility. As a parent, you are responsible for another person's life, well-being, and overall care. A monumental task, to say the least. I think when you have children the world becomes a much scarier place. Well, you are at least more aware of the dangers.

Of course, we can't live our lives based on fear, and we pray to God to remove our worries and anxieties, but that doesn't always work. If being a parent teaches you anything, it is an ongoing lesson in the meaning of the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment: "Thou shall have no other gods before me". For what else is worry, but an attempt to control everything and play God in our lives, and the lives of our children?

So, what are we to make of parenthood? On the one hand, we celebrate our children maturing; we enjoy watching them grow up, but we still can't help feeling a bit uneasy about the whole process. For we, ourselves, know that life is no picnic; that the hard knocks of life are inevitable, and they have to be learned by experience. We can't shield our children from every danger nor spare them from every hard lesson. The fact that life hurts is revealed only with time, and it's revealed to everyone just the same. Jesus tells us a parable this morning, which has direct implications on the universal and timeless struggles of parenthood. For the father in the parable had to know what was coming when his son asked for his inheritance in advance. The father must have felt a bit slighted by this; hurt by his son's sense of entitlement. And yet, he still gave the younger son his portion. As might have been expected, the son squandered his inheritance on who knows what. After hitting rock bottom, the son turned to working for his money realizing, I'm sure, it was much harder to earn a living than he had ever imagined. It's easy to live prodigiously on someone else's dime, but now forced to work for his daily bread, he found himself destitute and hungry. The world showed him no mercy. His employer certainly didn't care about who he was or who his daddy was. He was just another faceless worker; another cog in the wheel, which makes the machine produce. When the son finally did come to his senses, he grew nostalgic for his homeland. He remembered with fondness how his father had treated his hired servants: never allowing them to go hungry, but showing compassion even to the lowliest of his workers. The son planned his return, not knowing if he would be welcomed or not. He returned home, but this time not to demand something from his father, but to confess something. He came to beg

his father's forgiveness and ask only for a place amongst his workforce. What a transformation! He left home a young libertine and returned a broken man. The father, upon seeing his son approach, ran to meet him. He didn't stand there with an "I told you so" look on his face. He ran to meet him. And in doing so, he expressed something, which really needed no words— "I know life hurts my son, I've been there". This is the biblical model for parenthood. Not dictating or controlling, but leading by example and showing compassion when life hurts, when sins are committed and felt in the deepest way imaginable.

What is harder than personal suffering? Watching someone you love suffer is infinitely harder. That is why in my humble opinion, the greatest lesson we will ever teach our children is how to suffer well— How to understand suffering, bear it, make our way through it, find joy despite it, seek the good in it; to show by way of example how to process heartache, loss, sickness, disease, failure. The Father taught his son perspective; that it's never too late—there's always forgiveness, new starts, another chance at life. The father started again with His son by forgiving him. He started again by restoring his son to his former place in the family. Do you think the father too kind or lenient regarding his son? Where is the tough love, you might ask? Where is the "welcome to the real world" reaction? How quick we are to judge the actions of others, and yet how elastic we are with those same stiff judgments when love comes to bend them. But lest we think this a weakness on the father's part to show mercy, consider how our Savior bends in relationship to us. For this is what the parable is really all about. Christ bends in the incarnation as He takes on our human flesh. He stoops low to walk our path, to bear our burdens, to carry our sins. So that when we fall on his neck, and confess how we have made a mess of it all, He might respond: "life hurts. I've been there, my child, I know what it is to suffer; for once I suffered on a cross for you. Now hear my forgiveness, start again, welcome home". God provides us a homecoming for with the Lord there is plentiful redemption. Life is not a fairy tale. Sin is an eternal problem in need of a heavenly solution. In Christ, we have the solution. Day by day we live by His grace. Like the father in the parable, God never gives up on us even when we give up on ourselves. No matter how much life beats us up, no matter how far astray we wander, He is there with us. Always ready to welcome us back home, to embrace us as His children, and turn our disappointments into joy. This is the kind of heavenly Father we have, and I pray He serves as a model to all parents in general, and all fathers in particular. Amen.

