

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera QLD

1st September 2024 – Fathers' Day

Luke 15:11-24

PRICELESS LOVE

Fathers are renowned for many things, like showing love and care for their children, but also for telling Dad jokes. Just this week I read Hamish Blake saying that he never liked dad jokes, until he became a dad, and now he loves them. So, try these on: what do you call a fake noodle? An im-pasta. Why did the tomato blush? It saw the salad dressing. What did one plate whisper to the other plate? Dinner is on me. These jokes are received by everyone's groans, especially their children. But, maybe, these jokes are appreciated more than children sometimes let on. Ten years ago, at our eldest son's wedding, I was talking to a friend of mine at the reception when a group of Nathan's friends came up and formed a circle around us. 'So, you're Nathan's dad', the seemingly boldest of them said. 'Yes', was all I could think of to reply. Another chimed in with, 'Nathan says you are really funny', after which they all just looked at me, with looks of expectation that I would say something which would have them all rolling around on the ground laughing. What could I do? Being put on the spot like that I struggled to perform under that amount of pressure. My son had been telling everyone that I was really funny, and my mind was racing to come up with something which would justify his high praise of me. But my mind just went blank. Finally, after probably a minute of staring blankly at each other, but what seemed like an hour, they looked at each other with faces that said, 'oh well', said, 'see you later', and walked off with an air of disappointment that what had promised to be the main show on this day turned out to be a fizzer.

Father's Day is a reminder that fathers give us many things, not just bad jokes, but also love, forgiveness, advice, time, energy, their hearts. On this day we give gifts to our fathers, but we do so knowing that we can't begin to payback what we receive from them already. Instead, today we give gifts out of thanks for what has already been given to us; love we can't begin to put a price on. The love shown by fathers which is, priceless.

Our Gospel reading for this Father's Day is one which is very well known. In fact, as soon as we hear those opening words of Jesus, 'Once a man had two sons', we straight away think, 'Ah, the Parable of the Prodigal Son'. The danger is, though, that we know it so well it's easy to just switch off as though we are watching a favourite movie, and to not really listen to it again in a fresh way. Let's have another look at it today, though, first of all by giving it a new name. Rather than calling it *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*, a better, more accurate name, would be, *The Parable of the Loving Father*. Because this parable is really all about the great love and forgiveness shown by the father.

To really appreciate how great the father's love in this story is, though, we need to first look at what the son has done and his attitude to his father. First of all, the son comes to his father and says, 'Give me my share of the property'. What's he really saying to his father here? He is actually saying, 'Dad, you mean nothing to me alive, I would be better off if you were dead'. A good attitude? Not at all. One which would have undoubtedly hurt the father, but he gives him the property all the same. The son soon after sells up, and moves to the bright lights of the city to live it up on wine, women and song. Who worked hard, sweated, for this money? The father. Surely, he can't be pleased at the way the results of his hard work have been so badly squandered.

But of course, the money doesn't last, and before he knows it the son is friendless, moneyless, hopeless. He becomes what one of my lecturers once called, 'The Penitent Prodigal Pining in the Pig Pen'. And when he has reached rock bottom, even breaking Jewish law by taking care of pigs, he thinks about how his father's servants will be faring. He knows that, having taken his inheritance and left, he is 'dead' for his family. But surely, his father will show him enough mercy to treat him at least as a servant. And so, with a carefully crafted and rehearsed speech, he heads for home.

Meanwhile, back at the farm. We could understand the father writing off his youngest son. The insult, the public insult, he had been given was unforgivable. No one could criticise the father for doing what his son has done to him; forgetting all about him and treating him as if he were dead. Not only would that reaction be understandable, but it would also be justice.

Instead, what happens? Five things which would have not only surprised the wayward son, but everyone else as well. First of all, the father waits. This is one of my favourite pictures of God in the Bible. The father stands by the gate and waits, and waits, and waits, and then, he keeps on waiting. Everything else is neglected, only one thing matters, his son coming home. He let the son go, he doesn't chase him and try to get him back, but he's going to make sure that when his son does come back he'll be ready.

And when he sees his son coming from down the road, he is so happy he runs to him. Remember, he wasn't wearing trousers or shorts, but a robe. For an adult man, and an older one at that, to run in this way would have been most undignified. But does he care? No way! His son has come back, who cares what any one else thinks!

The son showed at the start of the story that he really didn't understand the father's love, and now he does it again. Despite the great love and joy the father has shown at his return, what does the son do? He begins his carefully rehearsed speech about only been fit to be a servant. He just doesn't get what the father's love is all about, does he? Instead, what does the father do? He forgives. There are no requirements here, no, 'when you can show me you can be trusted you can come back into this family'. No, all we have is complete and total forgiveness. No conditions, no requirements, just acceptance and forgiveness.

The father then, in a very public way, reinstates his son to his position as son. The clothes, the ring, the sandals, these are all things which say to the son and everyone else, 'This is my son.' It's very public. This father has no shame over what his son has done. His son is home, and that's all that matters.

And finally, there's the celebration. Just like in the two parables before this, the father's joy at finding the lost ends with a great celebration. We can imagine the son, when the shock of all which happens wears off, sitting back and thinking to himself, 'the love my father has shown to me really is priceless'.

It's a great story about our heavenly Father's love for us. Jesus told this parable, and the other two 'lost' parables right before it, because his enemies had said, 'This man is friendly with sinners'. If we see ourselves as the son in this story, which we should, we can reply, 'Thank God for that!' The priceless love the father shows in this story is the same as God shows to us. Whenever there is distance between us and God,

it's been created by us. But whenever we turn back, God is there, waiting patiently, running joyfully, forgiving unconditionally, reinstating totally, celebrating eternally.

I am sure that son, at least for a while, would have tried to work hard and show his father gratitude for the love he'd been shown. He wouldn't have been perfect, but hopefully he would have known that his father would love and forgive him no matter what. We are the same living in the love of our father. When we call this love 'priceless' that's because we can't begin to pay for it. But God did. God paid the price in the death of His Son, Jesus. A death which was solely for our sakes. We can't repay this love, but now we are called to respond to it. Through Jesus we have been reinstated as God's children, and now we can live as who we are. We can try to please Him as we try to live His way. We can try to show His love, forgiveness, and acceptance in our dealings with others. And just as He does all He can to bring people into His family, we can allow Him to use us to be a part of this work too.

On Father's Day we remember all that fathers have done and do for us. We know that they're not perfect, we're human, but fathers and mothers still provide us with the best earthly example of the total and unconditional love of God. Today too, though, we can remember the priceless love of our heavenly Father. Even when we feel like we're stuck deep down in the mud of the pig pen, we can remember His love for each one of us. For us this love is priceless, because we can't begin to repay it. For Him it cost the death of Jesus on the cross. Just like we give gifts today to thank our fathers for their love, may we continue to give our hearts and lives to our heavenly father to thank Him for His priceless love for us. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Is there a picture/image/parable from the Bible you find especially easy to relate to? Why do you think that is?
- Think about this parable of the Prodigal Son: why do you think people love it so much? Is there a particular aspect or teaching from it which is meaningful for you?
- What kind of relationship did you have with your father, or, if you are a father what kind of relationship do you have with your children? If it was/is good, thank God for that? If it wasn't/isn't good, bring this to God asking for His healing and forgiveness if possible.

Pray: thank God that He is our heavenly Father, who always cares for us, always loves us, always forgives us. Thank God for our fathers and pray that all fathers will show the same caring love to their children which God shows to us.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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