

Title: The Compassionate Father...

Text: Luke 15:8-32

Good morning, it's an honor to be with you this morning, and an equal honor for me to join your congregation for the next 8 weeks, providing some preaching and pastoral care.

Jennifer, my wife, and I came to Champaign-Urbana 37 years ago to do campus ministry at the University of Illinois. We thought we'd stay 5 years. And well, here we are. Currently, I am the director of Pastor-to-Pastor Initiatives, a small non-profit that helps pastors, leaders and churches through counseling, coaching, mentoring, retreats and consulting. Because of my relationship with Rick Snyder, who has just retired, and with Chuck Carlson, the interim pastor, they asked me, and the session agreed, to have me come aboard part-time for a season this summer to serve and help, as God leads. So good morning to you. It's an honor to be with you.

I'd be happy to meet with you, as time allows. That said, here's my email address up on the screen ... donfollis@gmail.com.

Email me and say, "Hi Don. Let's meet. I want to talk." I'll get back with you. Or if you want to call the church office, I will glad set up a time to talk with you.

Today is Father's day. Like all holidays, some like this day, others dread this day. Perhaps your view of Father's Day is like the man who once said to me of Christmas Day. "The best part of December 25th is when the clock strikes midnight and it becomes December 26th."

Some of you don't remember your father. Maybe you never knew him. Others of you have very fond memories of your father. Whatever the case, I invite you to open your heart this morning as I talk with you today about the father in Luke 15.

I want to tell you about my own father, as I believe he displayed one of the characteristics of this father in the parable – generosity. My father, who died in

2009 at age 81, was married to my mother 57 years. His working career spanned 60 years.

To understand this characteristic of generosity, I take you to a small town in Northwestern Kansas. Way back in the day on Father's day when I was 11, we had a church potluck and a softball game to follow. My dad was "Mr. Church." When the doors of the church were open, he was there. Well, we were there – all 8 of us. My father, my mother, the five kids and my grandmother, who lived with us from the time I was a young boy, following the death of my grandfather.

That particular Father's Day dad was in charge of the homemade ice cream. We had a hand-crank ice cream maker, like so many American families back in the 1960s. Dad had a specific way he used to ensure that the ice cream would come out just right. There was the wooden container and the ice and the salt and the brine and the old towels on top.

The plan that day was to play a softball game after the potluck and then break and eat the ice cream. I thought dad would merely tend the ice cream and watch us play since he was not much of an athlete.

But that Father's day dad decided to be play. And wouldn't you know it? We ended up on the same team, with my dad playing center field. My brother and I had gloves, which mom had remembered to put in the car. Dad had no glove – never did as far as I know. So we had dad playing centerfield with no glove.

During that game, 2 remarkable things happened. No, three. First, dad caught a pop fly with his bare hands way out in centerfield. Second, he hit a home run. I have no idea how. He ran like the wind. I somehow had missed that he could run so fast. I had never even seen him swing a bat.

The third occurrence happened when a boy on the other team – a kid in my Sunday school class – struck out. At least I thought he struck out. After 3 strikes – with the boy swinging three times at the ball and missing each time – our pitcher (another church dad) turned and looked at my dad in center field. The men apparently had talked beforehand.

Dad suddenly announced, "You get to bat until you hit the ball. No strikeouts."

Oh the “Dad-that-is-ridiculous” moans. My dad was not a softball player but he was a generous person, who apparently did not think strict rule-keeping was the order of the day on that particular Father’s Day. “It’s Father’s Day,” he said to his complaining 11-year-old boy. “I get to decide.” That was my dad, giving people another chance, just being nice. I saw him do this with the men who worked for him, sometimes to his detriment.

I’m setting you up, of course, but now you know that one I believe one of the principal elements of this father in Luke 15 is generosity – outlandish, off-the-chart, generosity. Today I am calling this parable the “The Parable of the generous father.” To show the spirit of the father in the famous story, I draw your attention to Rembrandt’s famous painting called “The Return of the Prodigal Son.”

Every morning when I step into my home office the father in this painting is waiting for me. It’s on my east wall. As I watch the sun come up, I see the father placing his hands on the kneeling son.

Look at this painting. Who is the most prominent figure in the painting? Do you see the younger son’s despair? I see the father first and foremost. I see a loving, tender, compassionate father. Look at those hands placed on the son’s back.

I like how Rembrandt depicts the father with a kind of deep tenderness and mercy. As I think of my own children and you think of your children, and as I consider my Creator God calling me a son and you consider your Creator God calling you a daughter, I think Rembrandt gets it right with his rendition of an old, half-blind father. Maybe in this rendition the father can’t see the returning son. Yes, I know, in the parable the father sees him and runs to him. But maybe there is a seeing with the inner eye, too, and maybe that’s what we see in this painting.

Use your imagination here, friends. This old father has seen it all – those aging eyes of his have seen it all. I can imagine that this father has said to himself many a time, “Oh the what-might-have-beens had my dear son not demanded inheritance and left. I got the reports over the months from those who had traveled. I never thought I’d see him again.”

Consider our Lord himself overlooking Jerusalem just before his crucifixion. He grieves as he looks out over Jerusalem saying, “How often did I want to be with you but you wouldn’t have me.”

In the parable the father sees the son when he is a long way off and runs to meet him. No, Rembrandt does not render the running father in his famous painting. He renders a father full of love and blessing and kindness and relief. His hands are tenderly placed on the son’s back. Put your own words into this father’s mouth. “Oh son, how I missed you. How I grieved for you. You made it back. I never thought I would see you again.”

This morning – Father’s Day 2015 – can you imagine your heavenly father as a grieving father – grieving when, for whatever reason, you are far from him? Jesus says, “Blessed are they that mourn for they will be comforted.” The older I get the more I believe, the more I know, that much of praying is grieving. Even St. Paul in Romans 8 says that we can pray with sighs too deep for words.

I think God mainly grieves over our sin so deeply because his love is so boundless. If this is your first time to ever consider this aspect of this Luke 15 – grieving – that’s good. Grieving always is part of loving well. And friends, don’t you know that if we could spend the morning passing the microphone from person to person in this sanctuary alone, how much grieving, how much pain would we hear as we told our stories?

So I am asking myself these questions this morning: Do you want to have a deeper love for your children? a deeper love for your spouse? a deeper love for humankind? Ask God to give you a heart of compassion to grieve well those you deeply love. Henri Nouwen said of the father in Luke 15 – “His only authority when the son returns is deep compassion.”

If the ability to grieve is the father’s first step toward what I’d call a true spiritual fatherhood or true spiritual motherhood, the second step is through his heart of forgiveness.

When the son comes to his senses, he determines to return home, begging for his father’s mercy and asking only that he become a hired servant. His speech is ready,

“I have sinned against heaven and before you. . . . treat me like one of the hired servants.”

There are no spiritual fathers, no spiritual mothers, and no spiritual persons who do not forgive. The father never lets his son even get to his speech. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Forgiving others – stepping off the escalator of revenge – is the way to step over the wall of our pride and our desire to stay in control of all the variables. Forgiveness is the only way to enter the house where the father dwells.

Indeed, allowing yourself to grieve the pain around you opens your heart to true solidarity with humankind. But forgiveness is the way to step over the wall and welcome others into your heart without expecting anything in return. “Only when I remember that I am the beloved child can I welcome those who want to return with the same compassion as that with which the Father welcomes me.” (The Return of the Prodigal Son, Henri Nouwen, p. 122).

How ridiculously generous is that? And now we see the father showering the sons with generosity – both sons. Even to the complaining elder son the father says, “All I have is yours.” The father pours out his very life. The younger son gets the robe, the ring, the sandals, and the feast. The older son is urged to accept his unique place in the father’s heart, too. By the way, how interesting in the whole of Luke chapter 15 you see 3 parables – the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son – that all hinge on the pursuit. Does our gracious father ever quit pursuing us?

The father pursues both sons, and I believe today that he is pursuing us too, because he loves us so much. This is not just a remarkable father, this is the portrayal of God (Nouwen, p.122). The generosity of God has no limits. What is this love that relentlessly pursues us, that will not let us go? “Greater love has no one than this; to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) This is the depth of the love to which we are giving our attention this morning. Love it turns out, is even stronger than death.

On this Father’s Day, our heavenly father calls us back home through his grieving, his forgiveness and his generosity. By his Spirit, he lives within each of us. We

are even given the mind of Christ. So we can be, as He is. So, how about those in your life? Will you welcome them back just as God welcomes you? What do you have to lose? What do you have to gain?

Just as I took note of my father's generosity on the Father's Day softball field way back in the day, so it is today. In a spirit of great generosity, the rebellious son and the resentful elder boy both are welcome at the party. Both get to receive the unconditional, forgiving love of the father. In my imagination, I like to picture the father walking the next day with the elder son – arm around him, kissing his neck and saying, "Thanks for coming to the party. I'm so proud of you. What a wonderful son you've been – through the thick and thin."

Friends, as sons and daughters of a loving Heavenly Father, receive his lavish love for your restless hearts. Allow yourselves to be transformed into a compassionate father, a kindhearted mother, or a loving friend, full of grace and mercy. God has no greater joy than to place his hands upon your shoulders, and welcome you home. And you will find no greater joy than to stretch out your arms and place your hands on the shoulders of all those in your life who need the blessing of being welcomed home.