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Luke 15:11-32  
"Faradic Fathers"

In my 27 years of ministry I've never preached a sermon about fathers or men on Father's Day/Men of the Church Sunday. I guess it feels too personal.

I decided to preach a sermon about fathers today. It will address the subject from a universal point of view to get myself out of the picture while at the same time finding myself in the picture.

We will look at the father in the prodigal son story but before I go there a brief word about the curious title of the sermon: "Faradic Fathers."

I wanted a title that best explained fathers and I wanted an alliteration. I looked for adjectives in the Webster's College Dictionary. The first was "fabulous" – fabulous fathers. That worked but it was a little over the top. The next was "faithful." I can go with that but it might be too obvious. How about "fair-minded", "fall-guy", or "fantastic?"

I settled on "faradic" named after physicist, Michael Faraday who I remember from physical science classes in high school. The dictionary definition of "faradic" is this: "of or pertaining to a discontinuous, asymmetric, alternating electric current from the secondary winding of an induction coil."

Now doesn't that explain fathers? For one, we don't know what it means, and two, when we break it down it contains qualities of fathers and men: discontinuous, asymmetric and alternating. They're electrical and secondary. I'm sure you know what I mean.

Seriously, fathers and men have a lot going for them and the father of the Prodigal Son story amply portrays the inner and outer workings of fathers in a universal sense.

The story centrally focuses on the son but one can almost equally focus on the father. Many commentators see the father as a kind of God figure and yet he's an ordinary human being struggling to be the best father in a complicated family context.

My sermon works through the text. The story is told by Jesus in Luke 15 and begins:

"There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them.

"A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

“But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’

Fathers and mothers have a special relationship with their children which continue into adulthood. Their son or daughter might go to them for a loan or for a share of the inheritance. In the patriarchal world of Jesus it was appropriate to go to Dad as the son did in this story.

Parents have to consider requests wisely and often like the father in the story they are soft touches. After all, they are our children and we want them to be happy and we want to trust them.

The father in this story trusted wholeheartedly. He might have made the wrong decision but he’s a generous father and wants his son to succeed on his own. From the outset, the story communicates that it’s not easy being a father, or parent for that matter. We need the Wisdom of Solomon.

The son blows his inheritance in short order and exacerbated by a famine he hits rock-bottom and what often happens at rock bottom he realizes that things back home are better even for the servants. In humility, which often comes from this kind of realization, he decides to return home and offer himself as a hired hand. He will say: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you...” The son becomes righteous as the bulletin cover quote affirms.

The story continues:

“So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.”

The father was worried sick about his son. He hadn’t heard from him and thought he was dead. The rough veneer even of a patriarchal father is stripped away. Fathers often have rough or firm exteriors but are caring and concerned on the inside and are just as worried about their children at any age as mothers are.

When the father sees his lost son at a distance he is filled with compassion and runs out to greet him, throws his arms around him and kisses him. One sees this kind of manly affection in African communities. Dads in the modern, industrial west are less demonstrative but given the chance they show affection.

In his joy, the father clothes his son with the best attire and calls for a celebration with a fatted calf. He is singularly-focused as the final part of the story shows. This part of the story portrays another side of fathers: The balancing of their relationship with all their children. In this case, there’s a second brother and he’s not happy. The story concludes:

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come,

and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in.

"His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

The worlds of the father and son are miles apart. They see things from different perspectives. One can understand the concerns of the brother. The father at least explains where he is coming from and is thus given an opportunity to express his love for both sons, albeit, in totally different ways given the circumstance.

"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." This comes with amazing affection and based on this experience I imagine that the father would have looked for an opportunity to have a celebration in honor of this son.

Regarding the lost son, the father says: "But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." This equally comes with amazing affection and so the father solidifies his love for both his children.

Since Jesus told this story we can assume that the father prayed daily for his entire family. He never gave up on his son, he was generous beyond words, he took the time to engage his children, and he listened and responded. He handled each situation as best he could. In hearing the older son he was open to change. He, like all fathers, is in process... He wasn't perfect. He was real. He cared.

He was "faradic." He was also fabulous, faithful and fantastic. Amen.