

Psalm 145 Jeremiah 31:1-14 1 St. Peter 5:5-11 St. Luke 15:1-10

Our Father

As many of you know, one of my favorite authors is a man by the name of Donald Miller. This wasn't always the case...the first book I read by Miller was *Blue Like Jazz* and I came away feeling that he needed some serious psycho-therapy. But it was his book *Searching for God Knows What* that changed the way I read his works. And after that I was hooked. Now, Miller writes a lot about growing up without a father figure and how this vacuum influenced his life as a Christian adult male, especially in his open and reflective book *To Own a Dragon*. This, I believe, is one of the reasons his books are so popular in our society today because many men feel the same way as he does...even those whose fathers did not abandon them at a young age. A lot of men today speak of some form of disconnection as far as their relationship with their fathers were or are concerned...and the depth of this disconnection, they claim, prevents them from developing a more intimate and meaningful relationship with the Father of all fathers, namely our Father God Himself.

Somehow, the argument goes, this disconnection is transferred from our human father to our heavenly Father and it influences the way we relate to Him in matters of trust and authority and guidance. And because of this, many men (and perhaps even women) are really practicing Deists as their image of God is one of a distant and disinterested Divine Parent...One Who grumbles when disturbed and Who is usually too busy with more important things than to be bothered with the likes of us. But can we really lay all the blame for this spiritual deformity at the feet of our earthly fathers? Is it really their fault if we carry the weight of their failures with us into adulthood? After all, who has ever

had a perfect parent and who has ever been a perfect parent? So is it fair to play the blame game at all?

These are awfully personal questions as I not only had to work through such issues myself, but as a father I have also had to deal with my own shortcomings with regard to my relationship with our children. For most of our married lives, Louise and I basically lived for our children...just about everything we did revolved around them and their various needs. But were we perfect? Not a bit of it! It didn't take me long to realize that as a father I repeated many of the things I did not appreciate about my father and I felt many times that even my best attempts were overshadowed, if not obliterated, by my faults. So, strictly speaking, my children can read Miller's books and, like me, they identify with a large amount of what he writes about even though they had and still have a father figure in their lives. And this is true of many other men and women in our society who grew up in stable homes with two loving and doting parents. It is true because every parent...every mother and every father...will fail at some or other point in life simply because we are all sinful, broken, fallen human beings. Not one of us is absolutely perfect.

Now, while we may smart at this blunt statement of fact, there really is very little we can do about it. However, there is a lot we can do about this all too common tendency of transferring these emotions and perceptions from our earthly father to our heavenly Father. There is no reason why the imperfections of our parent or parents should negatively influence the relationship we have with our Father God on a permanent basis because, unlike them, He is perfect. In His Word He tells us all about Who He is and how He relates to us as a faultless and flawless Father. So the problem isn't so much the

actual transfer of our feelings of abandonment or distrust or dissatisfaction from our parents to God...no, rather the problem is we have chosen to disregard what God says about Himself in His Word. In other words, we have chosen to embrace a distorted and broken image of Fatherhood rather than to embrace the true and real Father God Himself. This reminds me of a story told by Richard Stearns, the President of World Vision U.S., in his book *The Hole in our Gospel*. At the end of chapter one, Stearns tells us about a group of seminarians who “went through all sixty-six books of the Bible and underlined every passage and verse that dealt with poverty, wealth, justice, and oppression. Then one (of the) students took a pair of scissors and physically cut every one of those verses out of the Bible. The result was a volume in tatters that barely held together. Beginning with the Mosaic books, through the books of history, the Psalms and Proverbs, and the Major and Minor Prophets, to the four Gospels, the book of Acts, the Epistles and into Revelation, so central were these themes to Scripture that the resulting Bible was in shambles.” Now the purpose of the exercise was to show that God actually cares for more than just our souls...that He cares about what we do with our material things because He cares for the orphans and the widows and the starving and the oppressed and the poor and the sick and the dying...cutting out all the references to God’s statements regarding His heart for those who were suffering resulted in a Bible full of holes. You see, if we shrink Jesus to the size where He only save our souls, but does not yearn to change the world through us, then we have as surely cut holes in our Gospel as the seminary student did in Stearns’ story.

Now, this is just as true about those who go through life struggling to come to terms with the Father heart of God because of the imperfections of their earthly fathers. It is not the

faults and failures of their parents that they need to address, but rather their own reluctance to personally apply the many biblical texts about the Father heart of God to their relationship with Him.

Take our Psalm for today as an example. J. Clinton McCann, Jr. says in his commentary on this Psalm that, “Psalm 145 invites us to live in the world of God’s reign, the world where the fundamental reality and pervasive power is the gracious, compassionate, faithful love of God.”

Take a look at the Psalm for a moment, would you? Look at verse 3. Here David, the Psalmist describes God as great and greatly to be praised because His greatness is unsearchable or beyond understanding. In verse 5 David says he meditates on the glorious splendor of God’s majesty and on His wondrous works. In the next verse he says God’s acts are awesome and in the next he speaks of God’s great goodness and His righteousness. All this serves as a foundation for what he says in verses 8 and 9. “The Lord is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy. The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works.” According to Derek Kidner, this is one of the most quoted sayings in the Old Testament. It was originally an answer to Moses’ prayer “Show me Your glory” uttered on Mount Sinai. Now, as you keep going through this Psalm verse by verse you will see God revealed as the One Who upholds those who fall, and provides for those who are in need, Who alone is right in all that He does and the One Who is always near when called upon.

But it is not only the Psalm that speaks of God’s amazing love for us, but also our reading from the Prophet Jeremiah where God speaks of loving His children with an everlasting love and of causing them to be satisfied with His goodness. In our Gospel lesson for

today, St. Luke 15, in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, our Lord Jesus reveals the Father's deep concern for those who have not yet become one of His children. Just look at what Jesus said about the atmosphere in our Father's throneroom in verse 10. "Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." They rejoice because they know that the salvation of one lost soul is extremely precious to the One Who wills all to come to Him in repentance. Does this match the image of a disagreeable, angry, don't-bother-me-with-your-problems type God? And then in 1 St. Peter, the Apostle tells us that we ought to cast our cares upon God because He cares for us. And these are just a few verses! Throughout the Scriptures, God reveals Himself as a Father Who is fundamentally interested and intimately involved in our lives...watching expectantly, wanting to bless us with an abundance of His goodness...compassionately caring for our well-being...swift to respond to our cries for mercy and grace...always doing only what He knows is right for us because He loves us with an unconditional love.

But my point is that in choosing to believe what God has revealed about Himself in His Word, rather than what we learn from our day-to-day experiences of life in the midst of brokenness and strained relationships, we come to a better understanding of Who He is and how He desires to relate to us as His children. In this sense, our distorted image of God the Father really has very little to do with the fact that our earthly fathers failed us in one way or another. Even though our thoughts may have been negatively shaped through our experiences of rejection or abuse or misunderstanding or misperceptions or miscommunication, the bottom line is that God the Father has declared Himself to be a loving, kind, compassionate, gentle, patient, gracious, merciful, forgiving heavenly

Parent Who can never fail us and Who cares for us and wants only the best for us and is more than willing to help us when we come to Him in humility and submission. The question is do we believe that? And if not, why not? Surely no human being, regardless of how powerful they may be or how much influence they have or have had in our lives. Has the ability to make us to anything we do not want to do. And the same goes for believing in the perfection of God's Fatherly love for us.

Now, the ultimate proof of His love for us, is, of course, demonstrated most clearly in the self-sacrificial act of giving up His life for us on the cross. Indeed, Jesus said that there is no greater love than in laying down ones life for others. In this sense the Lord's Table is surely the place where we come face to face with the reality of the Father's immeasurably deep love for us. Here all of our false images of the Father's heart will be shattered if we are but willing to lay aside the blame game and to own our own faults and failures in our reluctance to embrace the Father's love as He has revealed it to us.

And so, dearest brethren, as you come into the presence of the One Who loves you with a perfect love, may He Who is our Heavenly Father, in His infinite mercy and grace, grant you the will and the determination to let go of the shadows you cling to so that you might see Him clearly in the light of His truth...and be set free to bask in the warm Sonshine of His love.

