

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
"Someone To Depend On"
James 1:16-18

Our text begins today by telling us that our Father in heaven is a gift giver, which encourages us to think of life and its resources as gifts from God. This is not unlike what Jesus calls our attention to in his Sermon on the Mount when he tells us not to be concerned about food and clothing. He entreats us to look at the birds of the air, and the lilies of the field. To consider the ways in which the Father is taking care of them. By his grace he clothes the flowers, and feeds the birds, so they don't worry about such things. How much more does the Father care about his own children, you and I? James is essentially saying the same things as he reminds us the Father is a gift giver.

But there is more as he associates the Father with light, and at first what may come to our minds are the heavenly lights, the sun, moon and stars. But as his description continues we see the "Father of Lights" doesn't change. There are no seasons, no night and day, this is a Father whom there is no variation, is not fickle, a Father who can be trusted. And beyond this the Father has a purpose which is to bring about a new humanity, and for that purpose we have been given birth. We the faithful are the first fruits, the beginning of a harvest, and there is more to come.

That's quite a lot said in just three verses, so we have much to talk about on this Father's Day Sunday. I suppose many of us, if not most of us, have forgiveness work to do when it comes to our fathers. They were there for us, and they weren't there for us. As with any human relationship even the ones who matter the most sometimes fail us, and we feel hurt, and angry, and struggle to let go and get on with our lives. Father's can be especially guilty in this area because in our culture the emphasis on individuality focus's on men. Father's can become so caught up in there own pursuits that they end up absent in our lives, even at times when we most need them, and this absence varies from family to family.

My father was absent to the extent that in my years as a young adult I often found myself searching for replacement father figures. And I found them in men like Dick Busic and Marcus Borg, but they weren't my real father. They were substitutes who served the purpose, but there was always something missing. Now I'm all grown up, and the more I become myself, the more I see him in me. My father was a hard worker, and so am I. I became a Leadsman, which was one under a Foreman at Oregon Freeze Dry Foods. My first serious job as a young adult. I led a crew of men in a cold room, dicing and loading chicken onto freeze dry carts. They gave me the leadership position primarily because I was such a hard worker. Later I led an even larger crew of women on the repack line. That didn't work out so well since it seemed they didn't want to be led by essentially a kid with limited relational skills.

I'm still a hard worker, like my father was and of the things which he gave to me this trait has made the biggest impact on my life. But I see something else of my father in me, and that is a deep appreciation for "All Things Bright And Beautiful" as the hymn goes. Though I don't get out in it much these days, God's Creation runs deep through me, as my father would often take me with him on hunting and fishing trips. These happened mostly in the Coastal Range of Oregon, but we would sometimes go to the desert in Eastern Oregon, or to the foothills of the Cascades. In my office is a large picture on the wall of a old logging road running through the forest. Though the picture could have been taken most anywhere, to me it's Oregon.

I'm talking about my father, on this Father's Day, in the hope that it's helping you bring to mind your own father. We all have one of course, and I don't know about your father? Was he there for you when you needed him? What gifts did he give you? Do you have much or little to forgive? I suspect that like myself, you too, as you age see more of your father in you. I hope this is a pleasant experience for you. I hope it is a valuable experience, because this recognition has much to do with bringing about wholeness in our lives. We may be tempted at times to split off from our fathers, but I wouldn't advise that. What I think we need to do is forgive and welcome them into the big picture of our lives. Into the whole of our being. That is the way to healing. The way to salvation. By the same token I understand for some this could be very, very difficult.

Another reason this could be very hard work is because many tend to ignore their inner lives, and spend an enormous amount of time taking care of business as usual. But the business as usual life is not the life we're really interested in. It's the the life going on beneath that one that is of greater importance. It's the life we concern ourselves with when we come to church on Sunday morning, or open our Bibles at home, or sit down in our prayer place to pray. This is our inner life where God dwells, and our fathers reside, whether living or dead. This is the place we must keep going to if we want to grow in Spirit, and become the children of God, the first fruits of the harvest our scripture is referring to today.

This takes discipline, because for a number of reasons its easier to simply avoid the inner life. There's to much unresolved down there, there's demons, and bad memories, and hidden pain we would just rather do without. But God is also down there, and we can't do without God. The world is trying to, but it's not working out well, is it? Without God we are all lost, wandering around wondering what life is really all about. I think it's all about the inner journey, and though there are many who never really venture far within themselves it is to their detriment, because the answers are within us. It is possible to discover who you really are, and what you really want, but it takes courage which can be another word for faith.

I had a dream the other night. Our dreams are sometimes just process dreams. Other dreams are more important because they come up from the depths, they come from God. As some Bible stories suggest, God can talk to us through our dreams. This dream began in the mountains and I was walking, and suddenly it began to get dark. And I wondered how I was going to continue my journey in the dark. But then I found myself beside a swamp and it was light again. I knew I had to start swimming through the swamp, but I was afraid there would by snakes and alligators. But I went in anyway and started swimming.

The swim through the swamp lasted for awhile, and it was broken up by clumps of grass and other vegetation, but after awhile there was a current. The current began to increase slowly, pushing me sideways, and the next thing I knew I was floating down in a wide river. The river took me to a logging town named Kennedy, and it was there that I got out of the water. I went to a park at the end of town, and there Karen joined me. Though I couldn't see her I knew she was with me, and we were looking for our dog Skylar. He was suppose to meet us there. We began to call out for him, and as we were calling out all these other types of animals began to emerge from the surrounding forest. Animals like little dogs that looked like Skylar, and deer and others that I can't remember, but there were many species of animals. Then I tried to remember where we last saw Skylar, where we left him, but Karen couldn't remember and neither could I. I woke up fearful and distraught because I couldn't remember where we left Skylar off last and that would be key to finding him again. I wanted to go back to where we left him and start looking for him there.

Now what's crucial with dreams is the interpretation of them, and this ones pretty straight-forward. It opens in the mountains where my father often took me on hunting trips, but it begins to get dark, and the darkness represents the beginning of my journey as a young adult without my father. It was dark because there was so much I needed, but didn't have. I found light in my faith in Jesus Christ, who becomes my father, but the going was tough, like swimming through a swamp, and I had to take risks. But I kept moving forward learning how to move ahead with the Spirit, which is the current in the dream which keeps growing stronger. Until finally I'm out of the swamp and in the strong current of "the river of the water of life." (Revelation 22:1a) The river takes me to a logging town. My father was a log scaler, and we lived in different "logging towns" throughout my childhood. The towns name is "Kennedy" who was a kind of father to us all for awhile. Who is a "father" of the country. I go to a park where Karen is, and this represents wholeness, the integration of male and female. And in the park we have lost Skylar, but in his place are numerous other animals who emerge from the surrounding forest.

The dream is about my father and fatherhood. I'm not actually a father, I missed that boat, but I am a grandfather. A role which is new to me, but clearly a role I am growing into. You see, what the dream is telling me is though I feel fatherhood is something I'm growing into, actually, within myself, I'm already a father. Because my human father is within me, along with my heavenly Father, all that remains to be discovered is myself as a father. That story is still unfolding. What the dream is telling me is not only am I discovering that father, but in terms of the realm of Spirit, I've already arrived. Wholeness is already within me, this life is just about discovering it. Meeting Karen at the park represents that wholeness, and the animals represent the Father who no longer takes care of just one animal, but is now concerned about all the animals.

I'm sure much of the subject material in my dream comes from the recent study we just finished in the Wednesday group of Henri Nouwen's book "The Return Of The Prodigal Son" of which he says about fatherhood:

Can I give without wanting anything in return, love without putting any conditions on my love? Considering my immense need for human recognition and affection, I realize that it will be a lifelong struggle. But I am also convinced that each time I step over this need and act free of my concern for return, I can trust that my life can truly bear the fruits of God's Spirit.

Is there a way to this spiritual fatherhood? Or am I doomed to remain so caught up in my own need to find a place in my world that I end up ever and again using the authority of power instead of the authority of compassion? ...If Jesus truly calls me to be compassionate as my heavenly Father is compassionate and if Jesus offers himself as the way to that compassionate life...then I must trust that I am capable of becoming the Father I am called to be. (p.128)

My dream ends with me feeling distraught because it's about moving on into fatherhood, and leaving the past behind. No one wants to do that, we want to create our little nests and live in them. But that's not how Jesus lived. He went from village to village, and finally to the city. Preaching the gospel, and healing and raising the dead. As the scriptures say, "...but the Son of man has no nowhere to lay his head." (Luke 9:58b) And though we can't in any practical sense move from town to town, we can grow and move on within ourselves. Indeed, we must keep growing into wholeness and holiness, because to live in any other way is to not really be alive. And it doesn't take long to discover when were on the wrong path, because to try to live within our routines, habits and addictions can soon result in depression. And there is plenty of that going around these days.

At this point, if you haven't read it already, I want to share today's Secret Place with you:

"It's a good tired feeling" that my dad always acknowledge after a hard day of work. One of my fondest memories is that of helping him while he worked on our white 1957 Chevy. As a small boy, most of my help involved shining a flashlight where his hands were so he could see what he was doing. But occasionally, he let me clean some of the dirty, greasy parts he had removed from the car and put in a metal pan. I remember thinking how an old, worn out toothbrush could still be a useful tool as I scrubbed away, using a little solvent to help remove the dirt and grime. My efforts made the old parts look new again. Even today, the smell of solvent brings back those precious memories spent with my dad when I was a child.

I also remember riding home in the car with my father after a long day. Both of us smelled like grease and solvent. In those moments I understood what my dad meant by "that good tired feeling."

Today, he is no longer with me. I am thankful I had a godly father who taught me many wonderful life lessons, such as the value of hard work and the satisfaction it brings. I still think of my dad after a hard days work when I too have "that good tired feeling."

Ron Wasson – Heath, Texas

I liked this one because he shared how his father taught him about the value of a hard days work, something my father taught me. Not so much in word, as by example. My dad was not a godly man like his, but he was my dad, and I like to think the best parts of him go on in me. Since I have no children there won't be any direct relation to pass along the best of me. My best hope is with my grandchildren and with these sermons. That I may continue through them and you, and whoever else might listen to or read them. And then again I'm contradicting myself since in a recent sermon I told you I no longer concern myself with being remembered. Obviously, I do, but there is a part of me, the very best part of me which doesn't. And that is the Father within me, the place I am going, and the place I have already arrived.

You too, are on your way to the Father or Mother within you. Nouwen puts it like this:

The fact is that, on many levels, I am still returning. But the closer I come to home the clearer becomes the realization that there is a call beyond the call to return. It is the call to become the Father who welcomes home and calls for a celebration. Having reclaimed my sonship, I now have to claim fatherhood. When I first saw Rembrandt's Prodigal Son, I could never have dreamt that becoming the repentant son was only a step on the way to becoming the welcoming father. I now see that the hands that forgive, console, heal, and offer a festive meal must become my own. Becoming the Father is, therefore, for me the surprising conclusion of these reflections on Rembrandt's, The Return of the Prodigal Son.

You would think the work involved to reach the point of being a returned prodigal would be enough, but as with God there is always more. There is always the next level. And I expect there is a level beyond becoming the Father. The important thing is to be on the road. To pass through the mountains, and the swamp, the logging town and the park. To stay excited about the journey itself. That's what makes life worthwhile. That keeps it interesting, and there are also those times of wonder and joy which stay with you. Those moments that take your breath away.

Rev. Mitch Becker
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