

"A FATHER'S BLESSING"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 19, 1983

"A FATHER'S BLESSING"

INTRODUCTION One recent Sunday evening I watched Leo Buscaglia on public television. Many of you know him. He writes books and lectures around the country and occasionally is seen on television. He has a lot of admirers. I like what he's saying. I understand that after his lectures on the road there's always a long line waiting to hug him; he's hugged his way around the United States several times.

He was raised in an Italian immigrant's home. He talks about growing up in that demonstrative, sometimes volatile, but always loving environment. He tells you wonderful stories about mama and papa. You listen to one of his speeches and you will feel disadvantaged that you weren't born Italian. On this particular night he talked about his class at USC, where he teaches psychology. He gave them the assignment to go home and tell their parents, "I love you". They were to return the next class session and report on what happened. He said that most of the students - the majority of them - could tell their mothers "I love you", but only the smallest percentage of the class were able to say these words to their fathers, "I love you".

DEVELOPMENT And why is that? He blamed it on the American masculine image of showing little or no emotion. I'm sure that a large part of it tied into that. We are conditioned as men in America to believe that showing emotion is a sign of weakness. Yes, I'm sure that's part of it, but I think that there is something else at work here. It has to do with the role of the father in our culture. Culture has to do with the customs, the rules, the traditions, the taboos that shape life so that it will have meaning for us. And the role of father in our culture is no accident; it's there for a purpose and it speaks to some deep human need.

To see it and hopefully to understand it better, let's go back to the beginnings of our culture. Let's go back to the Old Testament and look at one of the oldest traditions in the Old Testament, the story of Isaac blessing his son, Jacob. Old Isaac, the patriarch, a sort of "super-father" (that's what a patriarch was)...a patriarch is the father of the race. His is no ordinary story. This is what you call an archetype story, the source of meaning for all future generations. Isaac, the patriarch, old, blind and dying has called his sons to his bedside. Remember his sons - Jacob and Esau. Esau, a hunter, is the oldest; Jacob, the younger, is a shepherd. They represent the transition in the history of mankind from a nomadic hunting civilization into a settled, pastoral civilization. This is a story that reaches back into that early time in human civilization and culture.

It also reveals a custom called, "The Father's Blessing". The father passed the blessing on not only to the eldest son, a special blessing to him, but he also blessed the other children. To be blessed by the father meant that you had grown up, that you were now an adult, a man or a woman. You are granted permission now to be a person in your own right. You're no longer a child, under age, subordinate to the authority of a parent, but you are somebody now. You're important. That's what a blessing did for you!

The story reveals a number of very important things in the dynamics of our relationships between parents and children. It says that once the blessing is given it can never be retracted. It's like shooting an arrow into the air. You can never bring it back to the bow. So whoever has a blessing has a priceless gift that they can take with them for the rest of their lives.

And it reveals something about sibling rivalry. The rivalry between children in a family is competition for the blessings of the parents. That's the nature of it. And Jacob's behavior - which as this story unfolds - turns out to be something less than exemplary, is simply an indication to what lengths we will go to secure the father's blessing.

THE BLESSING

We no longer have a formal ritual of blessing, but we know what it means. We may not have even been raised by fathers. There are always single parents - women raising a family. That means that women - the mothers - must give the blessing to the child. We may have had fathers who gave us a curse instead of a blessing that we must carry with us the rest of our lives. That may be. But we still know what it means to get the father's blessing. There is no longer any formal act of blessing, but there are a thousand opportunities to do it - encounters, conversations, even family crises between parents and children - when you know that you have received the blessing. And you know more vividly if you haven't. Its absence from your life gives you the feeling that your life is incomplete, that you're not worth much. Let me share a personal word.

MY FATHER'S BLESSING

My father died quite suddenly the Summer I was 19. I had completed my second year in college. My sister had just graduated from college that June - with honors, hoopla and much family rejoicing. Her record was outstanding and my parents were quite proud of her and had reason to be. Being the younger of the two children in our family, I guess I felt a bit neglected at times, but always loved. Yes, I felt loved, but wasn't taken seriously, as if what I had to offer wasn't that good or as outstanding as that which my sister had who was not only a fine student, but a talented pianist and organist. You remember in the story of Isaac's blessing of Jacob and Esau, that Esau, the older, has the offering that is acceptable to his father and that Jacob's offering is rejected. This is an example of the relationship of children in the family to fathers. It's hard to express - very hard, except that some children know that there is something missing, something that they wait for that can only be given to them.

That last Summer of my father's life was a tough, demanding and difficult one for me personally. I was working in the hometown, delivering mail six days of the week for the PO and then on Sunday, I was in charge of a little Methodist Church 12 miles outside of town in a little place called Bleeker. I had received my Local Preacher's License that Spring which was the first step for those considering the ministry. I had ten Sundays to run that little church - to preach on a Sunday and make calls one night of the week. I had no idea of what I was doing or suppose to do, and to me it is convincing proof of the power of the Holy Spirit and the patience of good Church people that the Church was still there at the end of the Summer. I was determined to make the most of it, even trying to preach without notes because that was the way you were supposed to do it. We were told that was the best way because if you don't say anything at least people are impressed with the way that nothing is said. So I would memorize my sermon - usually three points. One Sunday I a "three pointer" as well as a girl friend in the congregation and I got through the first point and my mind went blank. I couldn't remember a thing. I spoke for five minutes and then said, "Let Us Pray". And they were thrilled. They thought it was the best I'd ever done, and attendance - as I recall - went up the next Sunday.

But each Sunday evening in July I'd go home and talk to my father, and he would listen to me. He listened to me, was interested in me, interested in what I was doing, interested in what I was reading and writing and saying. He was on my side. He was for me.

He passed away in early August of that Summer and I thank God for those conversations we had those Sunday nights in July before he died. I was pretty much on my own after he passed away, but I knew I was not alone. And I didn't know it then, but I came to realize later that it was in that Summer that I received the father's blessing. And I did a lot of growing up that Summer at the age of 19. I came of age and became independent. I could know who I am and know that it is OK!

That's something, I believe, of what a blessing gives us. There's something in us that needs that more than it needs anything else. You may not even be aware of having it if you have it. It's like good health. You don't think about it if you have it. You take it for granted. It's like a gift. But if you don't have it, you may not be aware of what it is that you don't have, but you know that something is missing from your life. And you may spend your entire life looking for it.

TWO FILMS Several years ago there was a film entitled, "I Never Sang for My Father" starring Gene Hackman. It was about a man 40 years old, working in Hollywood as a writer. He is going home to his parents in the middle West to help place them in a retirement home. But the real reason is to seek one more time to receive the blessing from his father. The father has never been able to tell his son that he loves him. He's not that kind of man. The only way the father knows how to relate to his children is to hold expectations over them. And now the father is old and his son is 40 years old. The father still communicates to the son through so many words that he still hasn't measured up.

The title of the picture, "I Never Sang for My Father" comes from an incident in the film when the father and son are going through old family albums reminiscing about the days when the boy was growing up. The son is reminded of a Grammar School play or pageant in which he was to sing. He recalls how he anticipated that his father was going to be there, and how exciting this was for him. As he relives this event out of his childhood, he notices that his father isn't listening to him, which reminds him that years ago his father didn't pay attention to him then, either - and the gulf between them widens.

And then just a couple of years ago another film focussed on the same thing - only this time it's about a woman, the same age - 40 years old - on the same mission. She comes home to receive the blessing of her father. She meets the family at the Summer house in order to try one more time. The film was called, "ON Golden Pond". It had a happier ending because the father blesses her - not through any formal ceremony - but through a particular incident when the father finally sees who his daughter is and enjoys her, appreciates her and rejoices in who she is, and is able to communicate that feeling to her. And she is blessed!

You remember that there was a lot of attention on that film because it starred Henry Fonda and Jane Fonda - father and daughter - as the father and the daughter in the film. Most of the world know about the estrangement that existed in the Fonda family between the legendary Henry Fonda and his two rebellious children, Jane and Peter Fonda. Jane said that it was during the filming of "On Golden Pond" that she was finally reconciled with her father. He said,

"It was as if we were role playing our relationship."

And Peter Fonda said it was shortly before his father died that he was reconciled with him. Peter had a reputation as a rebel. He explained it as saying that he was desperately fighting to establish his identity. He says he knows now that what he was really fighting for was for his father to give him his identity, to tell him that he is acceptable. And it happened. The old man dying, just like Isaac, and Peter was there. He said, "the last thing, the last full sentence my father spoke to me was, 'I love you very much, son.'" That's a blessing - a powerful blessing.

Fonda said that after he received that blessing, he felt for the first time in his life that he was proud to be who he is. There is something in us that demands a blessing, so much so that we don't even know who we are until we have it.

PRODIGAL SON With all of this in mind let's look to the New Testament lesson. It's another story about a father with two sons, an elder son obediently waiting at home for the blessing of the father and the younger son, like Jacob, who leaves home, doesn't deserve the blessing but gets it anyway.

Some children try to earn that blessing by staying at home and living up to the rules, waiting for the parents to bless them, and end up in self-righteousness. And other children give up trying to earn their acceptance and they leave home, go into a far country and try to establish their own identity. Some even live prodigal lives, wasting fortunes and families and reputations - all in an attempt to be somebody.

Both sons are alike - that's the point I want you to see. Both want the same thing desperately - the blessing of the father. Both of them are in exile. Not just one - but both. Different exiles, but both of them are estranged from the father. The point is that only one of them came home to ask the father's blessing. That's the point of the parable. The point of Jesus' teaching, the point of the Gospel we preach is that the person who asks and seeks the blessing of God gets it.

I hesitate approaching the parable in this way. I am sensitive to the fact that to talk about father and child relationships is to reach very deeply into all of our lives and to touch sensitive feelings, and for some people, to touch very painful feelings. Because human nature being what it is there are some people who are not able to express the feelings that they have for other people. That's just the way it is. And I'm also aware of the fact that some parents have rejected us. And that's a very, very painful burden to carry around with you all of your life. I even know the increasing objection of many women in the use of male metaphors to talk about our relationship with God, especially this most intimate and personal relationship of forgiveness and reconciliation.

But I also know this. If you don't speak of God as like a father then you have to speak of Him with another analogy, and I don't know of any other that is more consistent with 2,000 years of Christian experience or with the dynamics of human life than that of a father. We all know what it means to receive the Father's blessing - to be accepted as ourselves, to be appreciated for who we are, to be given permission to exist as we are. And we know that until we receive that blessing that we live in a kind of bondage - trying to be acceptable but always feeling rejected, trying to be ourselves but not liking what we have become, trying to be loved but feeling rejected, trying to achieve and never

being satisfied with the accomplishments that we have made. No matter what we do we know that it is not enough.

The need for acceptance is directed first at parents, but the point in using the analogy of the father in talking about God is that the need in us that is first directed toward parents is really directed towards God. We want to know: does God know of my existence? Does God love me? Does God give me a blessing in my life? At some point in our life we discover that that is the most basic need we have. Even those who have received the blessing of parents reach that point in their mature life where they realize that the need within them to be accepted is deeper than any human being could ever possibly meet. Nobody can.

And those who have never received the parental blessing can hear this as Good News. We don't need parental blessings to find our human fulfillment. Jesus used the analogy of the father's blessing to tell us that even if our human parents cannot tell us what they feel about us, God can. And He has. That's the Good News.

Remember that little poem by Joseph Pintauro that I quoted in a sermon three weeks ago. It's a favorite and we need to carry it around with us.

"To believe in God is to know that there is
somebody
Who knows you through and through,
And who loves you - still and all."

CLOSING I close with this illustration. William Saroyan, the writer, also died recently. His son, Aram, wrote a book about their relationship, entitled, Last Rites. I understand it's a kind of a Mommie Dearest, so I don't recommend it to you. I haven't read it myself but I heard of this incident in the book. It told of the reconciliation of Aram with his father. The relationship has been strained for years, but during his father's last days Aram visited him in the hospital, more out of a family obligation than anything else. So he went. Once there, something amazing happened.

He said it was incredible. To his surprise things went very smoothly. As he was prepared to leave Aram leaned down to kiss his father and his father - like the father in the parable - reached out and embraced his son, and held him for a long time. Nothing was said, but the son had come home. Nothing else mattered. The son had come home. All he had to do was come home and he got a blessing.

That experience is so deeply human, so universally understandable, so powerfully related to our deepest human need that Jesus chose it as the means of saying, "God is like that."

PRAYER Make us sensitive, Our Father, to your presence and nearness in our lives. Open the eyes of our understanding as we try to interpret thy word to us. Keep our minds clear, our imaginations alive, our hearts pure and humble, that we may turn to the great Book in which we find Your word knowing that in it You will somehow speak to us and to our human need. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen