

“Fathers Day”  
Jeremiah 31:7-9, Luke 15:11-32  
June 16, 2019

Forty years ago I spent a very enjoyable summer in one of the more troubled parts of the world: I lived with an Arab family - Palestinian Christians (Greek Orthodox, to be precise) - on what is variously known as the West Bank of the Jordan, as Occupied Palestine, or as Biblical Samaria. What you call it, of course, betrays your background, and your politics. But no matter: I had attended college with the youngest son in the family, had been a guest at his wedding and had already met his two elder brothers, who had emigrated to Texas. My friend Emil himself would eventually end up there as a professor in Denton at the University of North Texas. But my trip to the Promised Land allowed me, for the first time, to meet his father and sister who, as far as I could tell, had never left the land of biblical Israel. From what I could tell, Emil’s father was a rather prominent village leader, heading up one of the two premier families in town.

Living in a foreign land where everything can be so different could certainly be something of a shock - in this case, the dustiness of the desert, the scarcity of water, the strangeness of the food - all of it makes a kid from the cornfields of Illinois wonder how in the world he now found himself on what seemed to be, in some way, a different planet. Everything seems so outlandish that nothing will surprise you, or so you think. But I must admit I was a bit jolted when in the course of some conversation, my friend’s father announced, as if it were some kind of everyday fact that hardly anyone needed to be reminded of, that he, as the father in his household, was God. “I am Allah,” as he put it.

If this were really true, then I guess that just about everyday was Father’s Day for Mr. Sahliyyeh. I can remember my own father saying to me, “What do you think this is, Kiddie’s Day?” And I guess if I had had my way, everyday would indeed have been Kiddie’s Day. But in that home in the village of Taybeh, everyday was Father’s Day.

Well, what kind of father do you all think would deserve to have every day be Father’s Day? We all know that both the Old and New Testaments tell us to honor our

father and mother, and so in that sense we are told that every day can be considered father's day (as well as mother's day) whether we think they deserve the honor or not.

That's one of the wonderful things about God, however. God makes sure that for those who are his people, the rewards received are not just what we deserve because of what we do, but our reward is what God decides we need, no matter what our worthiness or worthlessness in the eyes of any absolute sense of human justice or legal rule of law. As far as God is concerned, all fathers and mothers are due our honor, just as all people everywhere are the objects of divine love and mercy, no matter what their condition or status.

So let's turn the question around, since we've already decided that, for God, every day IS father's day: we don't need to rate others of their worthiness. Instead let's ask ourselves, How do we ourselves stand? How do we rate?

Maybe one of the things that bothered me about my Arab friend's father is that he used God to justify what he was and how he acted. Instead, should it not be the other way around? That we should pattern ourselves on God's behavior rather than use God to justify what we already are? What is it about God that makes us call God Father, and how close do we ourselves come to that ideal, whether we are biologically fathers or not?

One illustration that treats such questions is the story of Jesus that is normally called the Prodigal Son. Nice title, except I never really knew what the word 'prodigal' meant. I had never heard the word outside of the Bible. I had no idea if it referred to the son, or referred to the father, since I didn't know if the phrase included an Apostrophe S: The Prodigal's Son.

I think that confusion is interesting, because there is a real question as to who the central character in the story really is. Problem Number One: there isn't one son, there are two. And both of them have more than a few faults. One breaks up the family, the other is a selfish ingrate. In fact, both sons are selfish: one gives the family name a bad reputation by all of his selfish living, while the other has no real concept of what love of

family is really all about. Both sons cause their father real grief, though in differing ways. Suffice it to say that neither of them are model children.

I'd like to think that the central character in Jesus' story was neither the son who ran off, nor the son who stayed home, nursing grudges. The main character here is the father of these two deplorable boys, because it is the father who has to deal with his reprehensible offspring, both of whom represent extremes of selfish behavior, neither of which is acceptable, frankly.

Now, what is it about the father that can make him bridge the gap? What is it about this dad that allows his love to be so all-encompassing that he can embrace both of his children? Or, as we might say in the early 21st century, what makes this father so special?

First off, the father treats his sons with respect. He must have known that when the younger asked for his share of the family fortune, it would come to no good. But his son was his son; he had a right to the money. He would ultimately decide how to dispose of it, sooner or later. No one, not even his father, could do it for him. If the father in this story had told the younger son that he could not receive his inheritance, their relationship would no longer have been father-to-son. Had the son been denied what was rightfully his, he would have been treated no better than a servant; to withhold from the son his due would have been tantamount to disowning him. The father knew that he couldn't live his son's life for him. That was not his job. His responsibility, as the father, would be to offer guidance, help, love ... but in the end, he knew, as a few of us have figured out in our enlightened age, that ultimately our children need to live their own lives.

Secondly, the father could tell when his prodigal son had had enough. When the man-boy came back in rags, downcast, physically run down, dejected - not only did his father recognize who this down-and-outer was, dad also realized that this was not the time for recriminations and retribution. The younger man had suffered enough. The father had also suffered enough in his own grief as he saw the mess his son had made.

But now was not the time for further punishment, as the older son would have wanted. Now was the time for forgiveness. That was the only way this son could grow up.

Thirdly, the father recognized that in favoring the one, he could be accused of preferring one of his children over the other. But different circumstances demand different solutions. Just as the Good Shepherd rejoices over finding the one lost sheep, even though he has another 99 locked safely away in his fold, and just as the housekeeper is glad she has found her one lost coin, even though her purse is full of other treasures, so is God equal in his love for all, but holds a heightened concern to save those who are lost.

As the Gospels repeatedly make clear, Jesus did not come for the Pharisees and the Saducees because (as a 21st century Jesus might have put it) the Pharisees and the Saducees already have it made. And so, Christ did not walk the roads of Galilee to offer the Kingdom to the righteous; their nests were already well feathered. So as Jesus still walks those dusty roads - not just of Palestine, but everywhere on earth where human needs are neglected, and where love is lacking - Jesus continues to minister to those who are lost. For the mission of the church today is not to serve itself, but to serve those who find themselves on the outside, on the margins, looking on to a world that all too easily forgets the wayward and the hapless. The mission of the church is not to close its doors into some tightly knit fellowship that distinguishes itself from the outside world, but to break down the barriers that separate us from each other, and which thus threaten to separate us from the love of God, the father of us all.

Let us pray: