

First Sunday after Trinity

Luke 16 (Rich man and Lazarus):

The rich man, stripped of his riches and his life, suffering in the torments of hell, cries out to Abraham and he calls him his father. John the Baptist warned the Pharisees and Sadducees not to boast that they are descendants of Abraham. "God can raise up for himself children of Abraham from these stones!" It's very natural to boast about who your father is, who your ancestors are, what earthly legacy you are a part of. Any sensible person would agree that it isn't noble or praiseworthy for someone to put down his father and his family line. Gen-Xers and Millennials ridiculing their Boomer parents isn't pleasing to God, just as it isn't pleasing for the Boomer children to dishonor their parents or for their parents to turn away from the truth and virtues passed down by their fathers. John the Baptist was sent to preach repentance, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the children to their fathers. God desires us to learn and believe the Word of God, which he revealed to our fathers. As Psalm 78 says,

Our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done.

For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children, that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children. (Psalm 78:2-6)

Even the rich man, now anything but rich, lacking all things good, tormented in his soul in the pit of hell, knows this much. He knows that he is a physical descendant of Abraham. He knows enough to call himself an Israelite, remembering at least the burning embers of his family heritage. But what good does it do him?

There is an attack on fatherhood in our current cultural climate. Radical social agendas deny the indispensable importance of a child having both a father and a mother. Founding fathers are demonized. History is revised and forgotten. Children are taught to look for faults in their fathers rather than to honor them and cover up their shame. Fatherhood is replaced by a generic parenthood while a father's stern discipline and manly influence on his children are replaced by micromanaging principles written up by busy-body experts. And of course the usual attacks on fatherhood are still around: drunkenness, unfaithfulness, neglect. Any civil person knows that such things are a problem. But again, what good does this do?

It does no good at all if you don't know and cling to the true heart of fatherhood. The poor beggar, Lazarus, was carried to the side of Abraham. He is the true child of Abraham. He, not the rich man, can confidently call Abraham his father. Why? It's because Lazarus was helped by the same God who helped Abraham. God is the Father of lights from whom all good and perfect gifts come, including fatherhood. Abraham was told by God that his descendants would be as the stars of heaven. In his Descendant all the nations of the earth would be blessed. This Descendant of Abraham, dwelling in his loins, would finally come forth almost two thousand years later. The Word of God who appeared to Abraham, the Word by whom all things were made, came in the flesh descended from Abraham to bless all nations. Abraham believed this promise. He believed the Word spoken to him. He told his children and his children's children about it. God counted his faith as righteousness.

This is what made Abraham a great father. It wasn't how wealthy and successful he was. It wasn't how held-together he was. It wasn't that a great physical nation came from his seed. It was because

the Son of God promised by the Father, the Word of God who appeared to Abraham, has done wonderful works. He is the innocent Son who obeyed his heavenly Father perfectly in the place of sinners. And by his righteousness, he covers the sins of those who are poor and meek and beat down by guilt. Those who trust in him have the same faith as Abraham. They are the ones described by the Psalmist, “the children which should be born.” They are born of water and the Spirit, given faith by the same Word who declared Abraham righteous and accomplished everything promised to Abraham.

It’s good and important for fathers to talk with their children. It’s good for fathers to discipline their children, to be involved in their children’s lives, even to play with them and teach them all sorts of skills. But what good does it do if your child learns how to make money, hit a baseball, serve a volleyball, and make lots of friends? If he never learns to associate himself with the poor and needy, to see his own need for mercy and help from his heavenly Father, to cling to the Word believed by Abraham, to seek a godly spouse and teach his children this same saving Word – if he neglects all these things – then his skills in this life, which bring him earthly success, will only serve toward his condemnation. Even the rich man knew who his dad was. Perhaps he learned from him how to make money. He knew that he was a descendant of Abraham. But again, God can raise up children of Abraham from the stones.

The rich man went to hell because he relied on his riches. He wasn’t condemned because God blessed him on earth. God blessed Abraham on earth as well. No, he was condemned because of what his heart received and clung to. He received his good things in this life rather than looking for them in the life to come. As Jesus warned against, he loved his life on earth. That is to say, he found his refuge in earthly things. And distracted by his own success, he neglected his brother, Lazarus. This is why his claim of Abraham as his father amounted to nothing more than an earthly claim of fame. He wasn’t a true child of Abraham, and this was proven by the fact that he couldn’t see Lazarus as his brother.

To be a child of Abraham is to trust what Abraham believed and thereby to love as your dear brothers and sisters those who also believe it. You can’t say you love God – you can’t call Abraham your father – if you neglect your poor brother standing at your door. You can’t see God, but you can see your brother. You can see your brother right here this morning. He comes in the poverty of his soul with a broken and contrite spirit. He speaks the words, “I, a poor miserable sinner,” and he truly means it as he clings only to the mercy of God in Christ to give him the one thing he knows he needs. Perhaps he has been stripped of earthly joys, bearing a cross of great grief, needing help in some way, or simply some encouraging words.

But the rich man, even in the afterlife, couldn’t recognize Lazarus as his brother. He only sees him as the one who now has the advantage over him. Instead, he sees the unbelieving sons of his earthly father to be his brothers. It’s sad. This is all the rich man can recognize. He can only cling to what his eyes could see on earth. Just as he boasted only in earthly things while he was alive, he still boasts only in earthly things as he suffers eternal death. He sees Abraham as his physical ancestor while he calls only his physical siblings his brothers. He doesn’t cling to the Word, which alone binds the children of God to their Brother Jesus. So he continues to despise Lazarus as nothing more than someone who can do his bidding. Send Lazarus to cool my tongue with water. Send Lazarus to warn my brothers. He doesn’t talk to Lazarus. He doesn’t care about Lazarus. Lazarus isn’t his brother. Here is that great chasm between heaven and hell. There is no brotherhood between the two. Any boast in family lineage and accomplishments means nothing.

Abraham won’t send Lazarus, his child in the faith, to do the bidding of this unbeliever. Lazarus is at rest. He dwells in Christ, the true Seed and Descendant of Abraham. He is clothed with him,

comforted by him, saved by him. This was the promise Lazarus had from the Word of God spoken by Moses and the prophets. This is the promise, which alone creates faith in our hearts and makes our children heirs of heaven.

So on this Father's Day, I appeal to you dads, be more than just a worldly father to your children. Be a spiritual father as well. Talk to your children about God's Word. Sing hymns with them at home. Discuss how the gospel applies to their daily lives. Let them see how you associate with the humble and bear with the weaknesses of those in this congregation. This goes for all of you men, even if you don't have children of your own. Be an example to all the young lambs of this congregation. If they look up to you, let it be because you cling to the promise your father Abraham trusted in.

Of course we want our children to succeed in what they do. What father doesn't? But at the heart of fatherhood – at the heart of our heavenly Father – is the fervent desire that our children know who their God is. He is the God who helps us, who has mercy on us, who forgives us for the sake of his dear Son, Jesus Christ. When we continue to stress this to our children, then we are handing down something much more precious than college degrees and earthly skills. And if our children fall into poverty, whether because they messed up or they missed out on accomplishing what we imagine they should accomplish, then we can associate with them all the more, embracing them not only as our children but as our brethren in Christ. Our Lord Jesus became poor. He made himself of no reputation. He was numbered among the failures, the transgressors, and the sinners. He did this all to become your brother, to comfort you through every trial, to calm your fears in the face of temptation, and to clothe you with his fine garments of righteousness. Let us pray:

Lord, make the fathers' voices ring,
And cause their children's hearts to sing
Thy gospel proclamation.
Still by this Word of Truth bestow
A living faith to cling and grow
In Thee, my soul's salvation!
So when my heart is sad and poor,
O grant me from Thy bounteous store
To be content with pain and loss,
With patience now to bear my cross.
Lord Jesus Christ, my Brother dear! My Brother dear!
Thy love removes all doubt and fear! Amen.