

“IS GOD REALLY A FATHER?”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: Psalm 103:13; John 17:23-26

We are talking about God this summer, about knowing God better through knowing His attributes. When I say the word God what comes to your mind?

Some think of a Supreme Court Judge sitting on His throne, judging the world. When we break the rules He punishes us.

Some think of a cosmic grandpa or favorite uncle doting on us. We ask and He's supposed to give us good things.

Some think of a coach or a boss who tells us what to do. We are supposed to do our best and if we do we are rewarded in some way.

Some think of a wise teacher who wants us to know everything in His text book because someday there will be a test. We are supposed to memorize it and spit it back out. If we get an “A” that's good. If we misbehave we might get detention or “breakfast club.”

Some think of God as a father. But even that's risky because there are so many different kinds of fathers. Some people have a mental image of father as someone full of hugs and kisses and tickles. For some the word father conjures up the smell alcohol and swear words. Some people hear the word father and remember wise sayings and sage advice. Some people cringe at the word, fearing another hit or worse, some inappropriate touch. And some hear the word father and come up empty, nothing there, just flat.

This universe is created by a God who is more than anything else a father. He is a father unlike any other kind of father you have ever met. He is a million times better than even the very best father who has ever lived.

If we really want to know God then we need to know what kind of father He is and we are going to have to let Him tell us from Scripture, because the message through the world and our earthly fathers is garbled and muddled, a mixed message at best.

What kind of Father God is not.

Let's use five "A's" to describe what our Father God is not like.

God is not *aloof* or passive. He isn't a couch potato who seldom has much to say. He doesn't assume you know He loves you, while never saying it out loud. He isn't unaware of your hurts or joys, your failures or successes. He doesn't keep His affections to Himself or not know how to express them.

God is not an *authoritarian* father. He isn't more interested in rules than a relationship, more interested in obedience than intimacy, with lists of do's and don'ts, saying no a lot, keeping a check list, leaving you with that nagging feeling of never quite measuring up. He isn't disinterested in you or your life or your dreams or goals.

God is not an *abusive* father, the kind who just inflicts pain whether physical, emotional, mental or even sexual out of his own emotional or moral weakness. It's no surprise those who had that kind of father have a particularly hard time developing a close relationship with the Heavenly Father.

God is not an *absent* father, so far away or distant or distracted as to never be around or available. He is not like the fathers who have abandoned us or completely neglected us, who make the presence of God seem like an impossibility.

God is not an *accusing* father who points out every failure, thinking he's motivating you to greatness by tearing you down. God is not like the comedian Steve Martin's father who when asked what he thought of his famous son, could only say, "Well, he's no Charlie Chaplin." An accusing father says he loves you but his words and actions all say the opposite.

Those five kinds of fathers fill our world. To some extent almost all of us have had fathers like that or some mix or combination of that. And to some extent most of us who are fathers have displayed to varying degrees some mix of those traits. I certainly can testify to that.

How God is a Father?

The Fatherhood of God is revealed in Scripture in three ways.

First, God is the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There was not a time when God was not a father. He is eternally a father, because Jesus is His eternally begotten Son. The Father has always been a father and the

Son has always been a son. God says to Jesus, "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well please, in whom I delight."

Every time Jesus addresses God in prayer He says Father, with only one exception. From the cross He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34).

It is from the lips of Jesus that we first learn the intimate term of affection, "Abba, Father." John's Gospel especially captures for us the love and intimacy between the Father and the Son.

John 5:19-20 So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. 20 For *the Father loves the Son* and shows him all that he himself is doing.

John 17:23-26 ... that the world may know that you sent me and loved them *even as you loved me*. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me *because you loved me before the foundation of the world*. 25 O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. 26 I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that *the love with which you have loved me* may be in them, and I in them."

There is nothing here of an aloof, authoritarian, abusive, absent, or accusing Father.

Second, God is the Father of Israel.

It is not the most common way God is referred to, but there are enough references to give evidence that God was the Father of the nation of Israel, of the people of God.

The emphasis in the OT is more on God as father to the nation of Israel. He leads them and cares for them, providing and protecting them.

Third, God is the Father of every Christian.

In the NT the emphasis shifts to being father to individual believers, the followers of Jesus. We won't get the NT if we don't understand God as Father.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of adoption and when we receive the Holy Spirit then we are able to say to God, “Abba, Father.” Then we are the children of His infinite love and affection.

Romans 8:14-16 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 ... you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

God is a Father only to those who have the Spirit of His Son. The Spirit is the Spirit of adoption and sonship, if we have the Spirit we are sons of the Father.

Every time I read I John 3:1 I find myself pausing just to drink it in, just to let the truth of it settle over my soul. It’s not a verse that should be rushed over or taken for granted or taken lightly.

I John 3:1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.

What is the chief characteristic of God’s Fatherhood?

There are lots of things we can say about God’s fatherhood, about what it means and how it is reflected in His relationship with us.

We could talk about how God is personal, relational, caring and compassionate, how He loves us and provides for us and protects us and disciplines us. We could talk about how God takes responsibility for us and takes the initiative in saving us and helping us and in doing good for us. These are all things a father does and all things God does.

But I want to focus with morning on one characteristic of God’s fatherhood that I have not emphasized in the past. God’s Fatherhood toward us is expressed in His *tenderness* toward us. God is tender with His children. One of the most beautiful expressions of this is in Psalm 103.

Psalm 103:10-14 He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

11 For as high as the heavens are above the earth,

so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

12 as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

13 *As a father shows compassion to his children,*

so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.

14 For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.

He knows us deeply, how we are made, what our weaknesses, frailties, and fears are. God is tender toward us not because we are good or strong or wise, but because we are dust and clay.

Tenderness is taking into account another person's weaknesses and fears and inadequacies and deficiencies and limitations and then working to serve and support and protect them. It is doing unto them as you would want done unto you.

Next week we will consider the omnipotence of God, that He is almighty, all powerful, He can crush and destroy and kill with just a word. As the strongest Father, He expresses His tenderness toward us by taking into account the weakness of those He loves and by dealing gently with us.

Isaiah 40:10-11 Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him;

11 He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

I confess to you that word tender is not one I use a lot, let alone practice a lot. It's not the most masculine sounding word. Sort of up there with precious. But there is no getting around it, God's fatherhood is primarily a fatherhood of tenderness and it needs to become part of our vocabulary and part of our practice, mine and yours, and especially all fathers.

When we pray, "Our Father who art in heaven" our first thought should be of the tenderness of God toward us and all who are His. We should hear that He takes pity on us, that He doesn't treat us as we deserve, that He takes into account that we are flesh, finite, mere dust, that He makes accommodation for our weakness.

Practical Implications and Applications.

If I wanted to make excuses for my lack of tenderness I could say that my dad was raised by a man about whom tenderness would not be listed as a strong suit. So my dad was on the authoritarian side.

And I think I would be safe to characterize past generations of Dutch fathers as not being the most tender of husbands and fathers. But we have as our example and help, our Father who is in heaven. The secret to tenderness is looking to our Father in heaven and to His Son who takes after His Father and lives it out for us. Consider how God is tender and follow that.

Tenderness doesn't mean no discipline, no correction, no rebuking, no admonishment, no spanking. Tenderness means discipline in love and out of love. Discipline without tenderness is ungodlike and will drive our children away from us. Discipline with tenderness will lead to righteousness (Hebrews 12:5-11).

Tenderness doesn't mean giving in to every wish or whim. Tenderness is directed toward wanting and seeking the best for another taking into account they are dust and clay.

Let me list some of the countless ways we can and should show tenderness. Because it's Father's Day and because we are focusing on the fatherhood of God most of my examples will lean in that direction, but please apply this truth to all of your relationships.

Tenderness is a husband being a I Peter 3:7 husband and making it his mission to understand what that means and do it better.

I Peter 3:7 Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Tenderness is learning her weaknesses and rather than exploiting them or being critical of them, learning to understand them and honor her for how God has created her and why.

Tenderness is a father being a Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21 father.

Ephesians 6:4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger.
Colossians 3:21 Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.

Tenderness is knowing the difference between willful disobedience and childish irresponsibility and responding appropriately.

Tenderness is helping with the homework, rather than saying "figure it out, I already went to school once."

Tenderness is not criticizing your son for not knowing how to use a tool or which way to turn it.

Tenderness is a husband comforting his wife through a death in the family.

Tenderness is helping your wife in the kitchen without grumbling.

Tenderness is not making fun of your wife's or your children's weaknesses or failures or inadequacies.

Tenderness accepts the weaknesses or failures of others and doesn't expect or demand perfection.

Tenderness is my wife consoling a terrified two-year old cowering on the floor of our car at his first Fourth of July fireworks show, not me saying "come on, it's just fireworks."

Tenderness is my brother comforting his daughter whose dog has run away, not me saying it's just a dog, get over it.

Tenderness is a teenager who takes hold of a younger sister's hand in a crowded mall or while crossing the street.

Tenderness is sticking your hand down the garbage disposal or some other nasty place and not making fun of those too squeamish to do so.

Tenderness is going out in the rain to roll up windows that you didn't leave down without rubbing someone else's nose in it.

Tenderness is dying to selfishness and not spending all the families' money on what you want.

Tenderness is not making your wife do all the discipline or making her get the kids to play video games less.

Tenderness is not making her call the cable company again to hassle about the bill or the service.

Tenderness is going to the door to deal with the salesman or cult person on the door step.

Tenderness is never saying anything about who might be putting on a few pounds.

Tenderness is complementing your wife and children again and again, telling them how much you love them. Telling your wife how glad you are she said yes, telling your children how proud you are of them and you delight in them.

Tenderness is opening doors, going last, waiting patiently, again. And it certainly is not honking the horn while you sit waiting in the driveway.

Tenderness is not taking your stress or fatigue out on family members or pets.

Tenderness in our arguments means all our quarrels will be lover's quarrels.

Tenderness is confessing quickly to being hot tempered or impatient or quick to anger.

Tenderness is not being annoyed with that thing your neighbor does or their dog.

You want to know how you can tell if there is tenderness in your home? Just watch your kids and see how they treat each other and others, and those younger and smaller than them.

Fatherhood is not just authority and responsibility and discipline. If our fatherhood is not tender it is not like God's fatherhood. God's fatherhood is full of love, mercy, intimacy, compassion. Tenderness knows nothing of being aloof, authoritarian, abusive, absent, or accusing.

As an older husband and father, I beg you younger husbands and fathers to learn these things much sooner than I did. Take this to heart. Look to your Father God and His ways with us and be tender toward those around you, especially those you love.

I am sad about all the ways I was not more tender to my wife and children. I am sad at all the opportunities I missed to show them what God is like.

Let's reverse the bad examples all around us, let's break the curse, break the chain, break the generational sins. By God's grace and example, by God's Spirit and Word in our hearts. Let's turn from our old ways and resolve by God's help to walk in newness of life.

Prayer: Our Father and our God from whom all fatherhood gets its name, I pray and appeal to you that according to the riches of your glory and out of the great treasure store of your grace you would grant us a fresh vision of your fatherly tenderness that we might be even more drawn to your Fatherly love and affection. And grant by your Holy Spirit in us that we would reflect your tenderness to each other and outdo one another in love and kindness and compassion.