



## *Round Hill Community Church*

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### **Sermon: June 21, 2009**

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**Fathers Count,** The Rev. Anita E. Keire

Luke 15: 11-32

A father's lot is not an easy one. Changing expectations of our men seem to demand more than they can often meet. Children want to play with fathers when their fathers may be exhausted. Wives want special attention from their husbands. They have some ideal in their mind of what husbands and fathers ought to be which does not square with reality. Employers demand increasing productivity with threats of actual or impending lay offs.

Many of us have grown up without fathers who may have been killed either in battle or at work. Or they may have died from natural causes. Some of us have lived in households that have been forsaken by fathers or where parents are divorced and fathers are like visitors around their children. Other children have fathers who live in their homes but who are inattentive to their emotional needs. In many homes, love and stability are fragile. Some fathers are negligent and abusive. They damage their children's self image and their children's chance for a good life.

The fathering role has been traditionally equated with provider. If a man were a good provider, he could often feel that his job as a parent was largely fulfilled.

In our culture, a father's self-image is created in his work environment. What counts for the male in our culture is not how tender, sensitive, and warm he is toward his children but how much income, power, security, and prestige he achieves as a working person.

Our culture measures a man's work; and consequently, he measures his own worth by economic achievement. Numerous social scientists have argued that men in our society work so hard and compete so fiercely because not to succeed as an individual in this system is to be less of a person. Men in a society like ours are called the walking wounded. When they meet another man who is doing better than they and have more education and a better position than they, there is an uncomfortable sense that a man's own position in life somehow has to be justified.

Fiercely competitive men have little time for parenting. They are too busy in the work place trying to earn money and achieve success. They are just not there for their children and wives.

However, those fathers who gain a certain amount of financial independence are able to give their children advantages over other children whose parents have limited financial means. Financially advantaged chil-

dren may enjoy the advantages they have for a time. But they know that no material provision equals a father's nurturance and companionship.

In *A Touch of Wonder*, Arthur Gordon tells how one day, when he was thirteen and his brother ten, his father promised to take them to the circus. But at lunch time, an urgent phone call came requiring their father's attention to his business. Arthur, bracing himself for a great disappointment was greatly relieved to hear his father say, "No, I can't come. It will have to wait!"

When his father joined the family again, his mother added her words: "The circus keeps coming back, you know!"

Arthur's father answered, "I know, but childhood doesn't!"

I know of one father who was a builder who went bankrupt. Two of his children were grown. His youngest son was 13 when this happened. The father went to work for others. When not working, he spent all his free time teaching his son how to hunt, fish, and do woodworking. He sat in the bleachers while his son played football and threw the javelin. He made certain that his son attended worship and learned about God in Jesus Christ. This father believed that the schools could educate his son in everything but those areas in which he put forth a special effort. Because of finances, the son had to earn good grades in order to get the necessary scholarships for college. His son had to work summers and on vacations for his spending money.

At this man's funeral, I mentioned to his son, who was then 21 years old, what a fine legacy his father had left him. In bitterness and self pity, the son said to me: "Yeh! Dad would say: 'See that mountain over there, I want you to climb it and without any help from me.'" I responded to this son's comment by saying his father was trying to prepare him for life. The son did not agree with me.

About ten years later, this son in utmost gratitude buried in his father's grave all the navy medals he had earned. He told his mother if it were not for his father he would never have earned them.

Fathering has changed from my time. Many mothers work. Therefore, it is necessary for fathers to take a more active role in nurturing and raising their children. It seems a closer bond exists between these fathers and their children.

General Collin Powell tells how his humble, hard working parents raised him. His father was a shipping clerk and his mother a seamstress. They emigrated from Jamaica in the early 1920's. General Powell says: "My father was gone all day, everyday. He never came home before 7 or 8 at night. My mother came home tired, too. But there was an expectation that you were supposed to do better than they. The key to opportunity in this country begins with education. My parents expected us to get educated. And in my family, you did what your parents expected of you."

General Powell continues: "I was never able to convince my parents that it would never be possible for me to do better than they did in providing their children with values and goals. It wasn't a matter of spending a great deal of time with my parents discussing things. We did not sit down at night, like the Brady Bunch, and review the work of the day. It was just the way they lived their lives. That's what children get from their parents. What they see. Not lectures or speeches. Children watch the way their parents live their lives. If they like what they see, if it makes sense to them, they will live their lives that way too. If the parents' values seem correct and relevant, the children will follow those values."

In today's scripture reading, the father represents God. God's love is unqualified and given to good people and sinners alike. His love is so abundant that he reaches out to save the lost. Just picture this father waiting day after day, year after year, for his son to return. The father does not know whether his son is alive or dead. When he finally sees his son, he runs to embrace him. He does not care what people think about his actions or the image that he has lost all sense of propriety. He runs down the road from his house to hug and kiss a smelly, dirty, tattered wastrel and penitent son who had disgraced his family. No thought as to what the neighbors or the servants would think ever entered the father's mind. You see, there was a special bond, a special love relationship that existed between them which nothing could break.

This father, just like God, does not put his son on probation to see how he will turn out now that his son has come to his senses. God, the Father, welcomes home the penitent son with overflowing love and generosity. God lavishly returns to an undeserving son his former status and relationship with Godself.

In this parable, some of us are the prodigal son and some are the elder brother. Often some of us are willful and inexcusably wayward. We are the takers who develop self-centered lives. When we do these things we are thrust into a foreign country. The foreign country is our forgetfulness of God, our alienation from God. In this foreign country, we yield to our baser appetites which leave us debased and living with the garbage of life.

In time, many of us see the futility of our ways and repent of ever leaving God and God's ways. Disillusioned, degraded, and destitute, we humbly turn around and head home to God. It is humiliating to admit our errors. Our behavior disgraced those who love us. But God is ever watching and waiting for us with outstretched arms. In fact, God travels more than half the distance to meet us.

God knows we will never truly be God's unless God gives us the freedom to be tempted to experiment in different ways of experiencing life. We all know of some children who are like the younger son who take their inheritance, which today tends to be an opportunity to attend college. They squander their inheritance by not studying and by riotous living. But part of the process of educating our children into becoming mature adults is giving them responsibility for their own lives and actions even if it means they squander their inheritance and their substance. Their inheritance may be gone, but God's and our love are not.

These experiences may be costly, but it is not the end of life. If we know God loves us, forgives us of our sins, and accepts us, new life in Christ can emerge. By returning home to God, we are returning to our roots that tell us what our purpose in life should be. The world's standards and God's standards are different. Our success will have been that we found our way home to God. And from there we can start anew on our spiritual journey in life.

Our return, however, may not always be well received by those in privileged positions. There will always be the jarring notes of the self-righteous elder brother who has lived his life in grim duty and not in loving service. People like him lack sympathy for down and outers and will even kick them down to hold them down. They have no forgiveness and no compassion.

So what should today's fathers do to prepare their children for the future? Fathers can be like the father in today's parable. They can try to live up to God's ideal role model. It is better to fall short of that model than to be like the elder brother who is non loving, non forgiving, and self righteous. Fathers can teach their children the difference between right and wrong. They can discipline them with firmness and yet love and be affectionate toward them. They can give a significant part of themselves to their children. They can help shape their children's inner spiritual lives. They can bring their children to the Lord and that will be the greatest gift of all.

Let me conclude with a story about a son's relationship with his father. A group of botanists were searching in the Alps for rare flowers. A very fine specimen was spotted on a small ledge of rock that could only be reached with a lifeline. The job was far too dangerous for the inexperienced botanists. So they summoned a local shepherd boy who was familiar with the terrain. They offered him several gold coins to climb down the rope and retrieve the rare specimen.

Although the boy desperately wanted the coins, he feared that the job was too dangerous. Several times he peered over the edge of the cliff but he could not see any safe way of getting to the flower. Besides, he would have to place his trust in the hands of strangers who would be holding his lifeline. Suddenly, the boy had an idea. He left the group for a few minutes. Then he returned holding the hand of a much older man. The shepherd boy then ran excitedly to the edge of the cliff and said to the botanists, "You can tie the rope under my arms now. I'll go into the canyon, as long as you let my father hold the rope."

Let us pray. Dear God, we ask that you bless all fathers and families. May they know your expectations of them and love for them. Amen.