

“Fatherly Love”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
June 19, 2017**

Old Testament lesson: Psalm 86:8-13

New Testament lesson: Matthew 10:32-39

Just before Father’s Day three years ago, USA Today published a list titled “10 of TV’s Most Beloved Dads.”¹ No. 1 on the list was Andy Taylor, the TV dad of Opie Taylor played by none other than Andy Griffith. No surprise there.

No. 2 was Archie Bunker from *All in the Family*. A little surprising, but he loved his little girl, if not his son-in-law, and most everyone else who was different from him.

No. 3 was Charles Ingalls from *Little House on the Prairie* – yeah, I buy that. And then there’s No. 4 – Bill Cosby as Cliff Huxtable. Well that’s problematic, isn’t it? I don’t think he’d make the list of best anything today. Bill Cosby, as most everyone knows, is facing a second jury trial on charges he drugged and sexually assaulted dozens of women going all the way back to the 1960s. You just never know.

What makes a good dad? Julian Marcus in an article on the website AskMen gives several qualities of a good father. From guidance and discipline to love and forgiveness, everything Marcus lists is also central to who God is as the absolute best parental role model.

So when a father or mother, aunt or uncle, grandfather or grandmother is not exhibiting such godly behavior, what’s a person to do? Draw closer to Jesus, even if it isn’t easy to do – even if there’s a lack of godly leadership in the household.

Easy is not something Jesus promises us or models for us. Jesus stayed faithful to God and God even when it wasn’t easy, even when Jesus was dealing with extreme hunger and thirst, rejection from his own family and townspeople, persecution by society, and struggling to fulfill the greatest responsibility of all, our salvation through the cross. Jesus prayed to have crucifixion taken from him, but he took it on nonetheless, for us, in following God’s will.

Jesus loved and followed God above all else, and that’s what makes those difficult words of Jesus tolerable when he says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”

¹ <http://televisions.reviewed.com/features/10-beloved-tv-dads>

Hearing this is intolerable, disturbing, until we realize he's not talking about separating a good father from his son, a good mother from her daughter.

Jesus is talking about loving God more than anyone else on the face of the earth – mother, father, or whoever. And what loving mother and father wouldn't want that for their children – that they would love God and conduct themselves according to God's will and God's word?

God's word and will is nowhere clearer to us than in the 10 Commandments. And yet, how well do we really listen for and follow God's direction? It's like the Sunday school teacher who was discussing the Ten Commandments with her 5- and 6-year-olds. After explaining the commandment to "honor your father and your mother," she asked, "Is there a commandment that teaches us how to treat our brothers and sisters?" Without missing a beat, one little boy answered, "Thou shall not kill."

Today's scripture lesson in no way diminishes or neglects what the Bible says about loving others and honoring our mothers and fathers. It actually amplifies it. Today's lesson is about loving and honoring our parents and loved ones so much that we choose what's best for us according to God's will even if they are not able or willing to see it or provide it.

Or as Jesus put it, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

It's hard to be a follower of Jesus. It means making tough choices, self-sacrificing choices. It means being committed to doing things God's way even if everyone around us is going in a different direction.

That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Jesus is telling us not to cling to how things are, but rather live into how things could be, how things should be, with God at the center of your life, whatever that might mean for you right now.

It is a tragedy – a sin – that family members, friends, and colleagues get in the way of what God would have for us – for you. God has a vision of love, peace, joy and plenty for each and every one of us – for everyone the world over. And that vision is obscured and even sabotaged when we put our will above God's will, our wellbeing above the wellbeing of friends, loved ones and even strangers, our success above the success of others.

We have the same responsibility to faithfully follow the word of God. This is especially true for you fathers and mothers and other parental figures here today – it is so important to use godly principles in guiding and directing and developing others. And ourselves! We can't let ourselves fall into bad habits, violent outbursts, abusive words and actions. God will not stand for that!

That's the sword part of today's scripture lesson – Jesus bringing a sword that separates people when they are not good for each other, and not necessarily for always, but until there's a realignment with God's will.

When Jesus says, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," he's saying that it's not about getting along at all costs, as if ungodly behaviors don't matter. Rather, we are to continually measure ourselves against the vision and the plan that God has for us, including the type of person we are supposed to be, the types of families and households God envisions. Discerning and maintaining God's vision for your life is more important than compromising yourself in an ungodly situation.

Jesus underscores this by pointing to the need to have a community of faith even apart from one's family if necessary. At the time of Matthew, households worshipped various gods – all kinds of Greek and Roman gods. So when a son or a daughter became a follower of Christ they could no longer in good conscience participate in the household religion.

They couldn't make offerings to the household gods. If they were Jewish, they couldn't participate in the Temple processions and practices. No wonder Jesus was so adamant about not letting family get in the way of Christian faith and practices. For a Christian, following Christ is the only way that leads to a full and blessed life.

And yet, following Christ is not easy, particularly in this day and age, with its focus on self-gratification and doing things our own way. We need guidance to help us refrain from giving in, to keep us from losing what it is that makes us a beloved child of God. The community of faith, the church, is the one place – despite our struggles and faults – it's the one place dedicated to helping us create and maintain households and communities and nations that know what it is to be faithful to God above all else – both the cost and the blessing, worldly cost and divine blessings.

Let each of us take a moment right now to think of one thing that we know in our heart of hearts is getting in between us and who God would have us be. Think of one thing getting in between you and God's vision for your life. Consider the cost. Consider the effect of that choice – choosing to do it your way, choosing to ignore the help God holds out to you, choosing to take the easy way out. Consider the cost. And then consider the possibilities when doing things God's way.

We can each be a better person – a better man, or woman, a better son or daughter, a better friend or loved one. And all it takes is identifying that one thing we've let slip in being faithful to God, and then seek help to turn it around, to regain a more solid footing. Make that your greatest commitment in life.

That's what it is to be a good father, a good mother, a godly person, a beloved child of God. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Almighty God, sometimes the difficulties and burdens of our lives cause us to doubt your goodness. We are an anxious people, often struggling to trust in your promise to work all things for good.

Increase our faith and grant us your peace, that our lives will demonstrate our trust in you.

We ask your comforting presence for Linda Schroer, and for Amy, Julie, Robbie and all the family; for Laura Gillet and CJ and Aislin; for Tim Barker and the other family and loved ones of his sweet wife Connie.

We don't fully understand why good people die, and die young. But we do know your promise, O Lord, that in you, we can never be separated from those we love who are always with us in your Spirit.

We pray, Lord, for the congressmen and staffers who were shot at in Alexandria on Wednesday. And we pray for our nation, Lord, where people think violence is the solution. Forgive our hateful ways, and teach us the way of peace and love.

We ask this with confidence, knowing that we are your beloved children, and that you will lead us to a brighter future, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**