

Paul Lombardo, August 9, 2009

**“Some People’s Kids....Some People’s Dads”**

**(Luke 15:11-32)**

Some people’s kids! I mean it, really, can you believe this guy? He walks up to his father one day (and what is it Emeril Legassi says?) BAM! “Dad, I want you DEAD!” BAM! “I want you dead, RIGHT NOW!” BAM! “Not only do I want you dead, Dad, I want what would be coming to me when you ARE dead. I want my inheritance, RIGHT NOW!” Like a jagged, rusty old knife shoved right between his ribs and straight into his heart, his son’s words felt like a wounding and tearing, ripping this poor man’s life apart. These hurtful words came from his darling baby boy. The boy his wife and he had loved and nurtured and been so proud of. This was the boy who sat on his knee, who had his chin, and his mother’s smile - his flesh and blood. This was the young man standing before him with such anger and distance in his eyes. He couldn’t understand it. He couldn’t find the words to respond to such vehemence. He could only stand there in mute shock, disbelief, pain and anger.

Now I don’t want to blow anyone’s cover here, but if you’ve survived into your adulthood, you ALSO somehow, survived your youth – specifically your teens. You remember, that lovely period, when if you were like me, you were completely adorable. Those years when you were completely loveable and obedient, when you were never rebellious, never back-talked or sassied your parents, when you never caused any grief at all to your parents... REMEMBER? Uh....NO? To be quite honest, it’s a wonder that any of us survived our youth without being murdered by our own parents. I know that it’s difficult to believe for those of you who know the vast depth and breadth of my dignity and maturity now, but I used to have quite a smart mouth. I remember once, when I was about 12 or 13, refusing for the 1000<sup>th</sup> time, that I was NOT going to eat something my mother had prepared for dinner. It didn’t matter much to me that my mother was a single working woman, who had rushed home from work to fix supper for us. It also didn’t much enter my OH SO ADORABLE LITTLE HEAD that maybe she didn’t have the money, much less the energy or the time to fix anything more than maybe a hamburger patty, Mac and cheese and perhaps a vegetable. It didn’t occur to me that maybe broccoli, spinach, or BRUSSELLS SPROUTS, might be a vegetable that SHE liked. What DID matter was that I was tired of it, or that I didn’t like it and that the evil little woman was forcing ME to eat it! My mother was a WAC (the Women’s Army Corps) in World War 2. And she liked to quote General Eisenhower when it came to food: “Take all you want, but eat all you take.” And on this occasion, she not only quoted Ike, but she also added that little chestnut that parents always seemed to add in those days, “There are children in China and India who don’t have enough to eat...” I looked her right in the eyes and said, “Mother, name TWO!” BAM! I’m sure I deserved what I got

too! My ears are STILL ringing... (However, I still don't eat Brussels Sprouts...) How do ANY of us reach adulthood? Is it just to have our OWN kids so that we have the joy of watching them make the same mistakes? How did our parents, whatever their faults and mistakes, survive US? How did the man in our story, survive the moment when his son basically told him he wanted him dead?

Jesus is telling this story to some people who were confused about his refusal to leave anyone behind. They were called Pharisees. They wanted to know why he was spending time with sinners, with tax collectors and prostitutes; with people they considered unclean and unworthy. Now I don't want you to think that the Pharisees were necessarily evil people, despite everything you've seen in the movies or heard in other sermons. They were purists, yes, and we know purists or conservatives in every faith, including our own, but they were merely people who were trying to worship God in a way that made sense to them. The trouble was that they had God in a box, and had gained authority in the community at large, and had political clout as well. So here they come to Jesus, all full of how one is to worship God, and how one is to live one's life, and how one is to behave! And Jesus, rather than being annoyed, or irritated, or even answering directly, tells them some stories.

He first tells them about a man who had a flock of sheep, and lost one. The shepherd leaves his flock and goes out to find the lost sheep. When he finds it, he brings it back to the flock, and then celebrates with his friends. Then Jesus tells of a woman who had some silver coins and lost one. She swept and cleaned her house, found the lost coin, called her neighbors in and had a party. And then... Jesus tells the story about a man with two sons.

Oh yeah, this man had TWO sons. We don't really hear about the elder son throughout the first three quarters of the story. But when he finally IS introduced, we have to wonder again how this man survived his children! The elder son, apparently, is filled with self-righteous anger, self pity, superiority, inferiority, who knows WHAT ALL? He's been there all along with the father, and he doesn't know the man AT ALL! He's been toiling along all these years, seething with resentment, anger and bitterness, because HE thought he never got to do what HE wanted to do. He ALWAYS did what the old man said. He ALWAYS was pleasing. He hated the younger brother, because as far as he was concerned, the younger brother got away with ANYTHING – even wasting his entire portion of Dad's estate.

How many people here today have a younger sibling? I am not the oldest in my family - I'm in the middle. But I do have a younger sister named Sharon. Sharon has this very irritating habit of not DOING what I think she ought to do! The very idea!!! When we were very young, Sharon and I were selected by an aunt or an older cousin to be the junior bride and groom in her wedding. I was about 5 and Sharon was about 3. All we had to do was walk from the back to the front... DOWN the aisle and then off to the side. Now I'm not saying I'm anal or anything... but I had it very clear - GET down the aisle... stand off to the side. That was my task, AND Sharon's and we were going to get there, get it done,

and get it over with! But Sharon... on the day of the wedding had LOVELY BOUNCY HAIR and a NEW PINK SATIN DRESS with FOUR – count them - FOUR petticoats, just like the big girl bridesmaids!!!! Oh and she had a basket of flowers we were supposed to strewwww down the aisle for the bride to tread gracefully upon... All we had to do was get from the back to the front and then stand to the side, while strewing our flowers. Easy Peasy! NOT! My darling sister Sharon wanted to show everyone her brand new PINK SATIN DRESS with FOUR – count them - FOUR petticoats, just like the big girl bridesmaids. And at every aisle, she stopped and showed the people sitting there her new PINK SATIN DRESS with FOUR – count them - FOUR petticoats, just like the big girl bridesmaids. The flowers were thrown in clumps, not strewn. She couldn't have cared less about what I wanted. She was having a WONDERFUL time. I on the other hand was LIVID and NOT having a wonderful time! I tried to drag my sister down the aisle, and she was having none of it. As far as she was concerned, the people NEEDED to see her new PINK SATIN DRESS with FOUR – count them - FOUR petticoats, just like the big girl bridesmaids. At age five I couldn't see how funny and precious all this was. How the adults loved us and laughed to see how adorable we were in our differences. I certainly couldn't see the joy my sister had in her beautiful new dress. To tell the truth, Sharon and I have been playing out that little scene pretty much all of our lives. I STILL think there's a better way for her to do things than what she's doing. So I find myself, dragging, prodding, and badgering her to do things differently. Whether she admits it or not, Sharon still thinks I'm judgmental and bossy. And she blithely ignores me and pretty much does whatever she wants! Don't misunderstand, I love my sister, and truly want what's best for her, but sometimes, we're both blinded by our WANTS, and we don't see the other's true NEEDS...

The elder brother, and perhaps the Pharisees, couldn't see the true neediness of the younger brother and of the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the "sinners" around Jesus. The elder brother certainly couldn't see the pain, the sorrow and the grief he and his brother caused their father all those years. One son delivers pain in his absolute physical, visceral rejection of the father, the family, the community, and the other son in his complete misunderstanding of whom and what the father was. HOW do we get from the father who suffers all this at the beginning of the story, to the man we see embracing his sons at the end?

Well, it certainly wasn't easy! I believe that before he was able to embrace his sons, he had to first find a way to embrace the suffering, the pain, and the grief, and come out of all that a different kind of person. You see, the point of the story is that Jesus is calling us all to be like the father. HUH? You mean be like a man whose children treat him with such disregard and disrespect? To be a person who embraces the wounds that life slings in our direction? To be the kind of person who refuses to hold other people accountable for their mistakes and sins - the mistakes and sins that end up hurting ME?

Look at what the father does. In my mind's eye, I see the father now as quite elderly. Maybe going blind, or perhaps crippled up with arthritis. But whatever his condition, somehow he sees his younger son coming down the road at a great distance, and he RUNS to him. He couldn't care less about his dignity, his arthritis, or his standing in the community. He lifts up his feet and RUNS to his son. He grabs that kid and holds him so tightly! The son can barely get out his little speech about how he's been wrong and sinned and can he please just be a servant and have something to eat. All the while, the father is holding him tightly, folding him into the circle of his arms. And with his ear pressed against his father's chest, the only thing that the son can truly hear is the steady, loving heartbeat of his father. It was the same heart that the son had so desperately wounded; and there it was, piercing into his soul – laying bare all the excuses, the self-talk, the fear of rejection – setting it all aside with pure love, non-judgment, acceptance and forgiveness.

I wonder - can you hear the heartbeat of the father? It was the same heart that sent the father out to the elder son, begging him to come into the party. Do you ever wonder what causes a man with sons like this to become the kind of person who still loves, accepts, understands and finds compassion and forgiveness for them? Can you imagine how many bitter, lonely, anguished nights the father must have suffered through to get to this place of serenity and acceptance? I can honestly only imagine! But I'm beginning to see that the road to this kind of joyful compassion and forgiveness is a path littered with grief and pain.

Now you're likely saying to yourself "Paulie thinks we're called to this kind of compassion and understanding??? Is he saying one has to suffer like the father suffered in order to be able to offer others forgiveness, and acceptance??? Is Jesus saying that we are to just automatically overlook people's mistakes, not hold them accountable for their wrongs???" What about Fascism, and concentration camps, and Rwanda, and genocide, and radicalism, and terrorism and madmen flying loaded passenger jets into skyscrapers? What about Sunnis and Shiites, and the children of Israeli and Palestinian mothers throwing grenades at each other. What about violence and the ghettos and politicians without souls? What about children wounded in domestic crises, and sexual assault, and loved ones killed by drunk drivers? What about unfair layoffs, and bosses who care only about the bottom line? What about that fool that cut you off on the freeway this morning? This world is filled with hatred and murder and children being hurt. Broken, wounded evil running rampant! HOW can we NOT hold these people accountable? And yet the Jesus who is telling this little story, a short while later is dying on a bloody cross, asking God to forgive his murderers, because "they didn't know what they were doing..." It's almost impossible to understand and perhaps even harder to believe.

Well, here's the point: suffering is going to come, whether it's from our children or from just living life. What I AM suggesting, and part of what I believe Jesus is teaching, is to allow the pain to work in your life to bring about a

complete change of heart. You see, I don't think this story is about the two sons. For me it's all about the father moving from anger and hurt to acceptance, forgiveness, non-judgment and love. It's all about inviting the ones who've hurt him to the celebration. It's about allowing someone, even the guilty, to receive the gift of your unconditional acceptance and love. It's not easy... You begin by enfolding yourself in the loving arms of God's compassion, understanding, and forgiveness – for YOU, and ultimately, within that embrace, you'll find a way to do the same for the one who has wounded you. Find the joy of just NOT holding the sinner accountable for their sins – it's God's business anyway. I'm talking about what's going on in your insides, I'm not talking about the courts and police and all that...! Find a way to invite the one who's wronged you, who's hurt you, who doesn't fit into your plan, to the party, and you'll find that YOU'RE healed in the process. You'll notice the father begged BOTH sons to come to the celebration. The sinners AND the Pharisees were invited to celebrate with Jesus. It's about allowing yourself to listen to the steady loving heartbeat of our eternal father.

It's about becoming the source of that embrace of compassion that heals and forgives. You see it works both ways... Like the father in our story, allow the wounds and suffering to work in and through us to bring about healing and acceptance for others. Listen for the Heavenly Father's heartbeat, steady, strong, and loving as you kneel in His embrace. Find the courage there to celebrate the joy of your own forgiveness. And in turn, offer the joy of the Father's celebration to others.... Feel the embrace of God. Feel his acceptance, forgiveness and love. And in that embrace, find rest, find renewal, and find peace. Amen.