

Numbers 21:4-9  
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22  
Ephesians 2:1-10  
John 3:14-21

Sermon for 3/10/24

## OUR FATHER, WHO ART IN HEAVEN

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: For God so loved the world

In the Old Testament, you find very few references to God as Father. I once made a note of them as I read through the OT and if memory serves, I believe I only found four, although I may have missed one or two. But in any case, they are very few. The writers of the OT instead speak and write of God almost invariably as someone regal and distant, as a lawgiver and ruler, whose relationship to us is modeled almost universally as that of a sovereign over His subjects.

It remained for Jesus to substitute the image with which we, as Christians, are now familiar and comfortable, of God not only as our creator, in the sense of our manufacturer, like a manufacturer who fashioned us out of clay, but in the sense of someone who gives birth to us, and raises us. And to this day, Christianity is still the only religion in human history that places that understanding of our relationship with God at its heart. The very prayer that He instructed us to model all our communication with God upon begins: Our Father, who art in heaven...

And that very naturally leads us to reflect upon the nature of that relationship between Father and child, or more generally, between parents and their children, that led Jesus to reveal that parental relationship to us as reflecting the true, heavenly reality. So that's what I'd like us to think about this morning.

Now I personally have never had or raised any children, so I can't speak from firsthand experience, only from observation. But I would ask that you think along with me, and I wonder whether we couldn't agree that there are at least three

qualities of the ideal parent that Jesus may have had in view when He set that image before us as the most appropriate way for us of thinking about God.

The first ideal is that the parent loves the child; the second is that the parent prepares the child to deal with the world; and the third and last is that the parent sets the child free. Lack of love, lack of preparation, and lack of independence are all conditions that can radically hinder the full development of our potential as human beings; and I suspect that everyone here, by surveying the lives of those we've known, and perhaps even our own lives, could offer testimony of that sometimes difficult truth.

Our gospel selection for this morning shows us, I believe, how God fulfills those three requirements, and may therefore help us to understand why Jesus pointed us towards the image of parenthood, at least in its ideal, as our best means of appreciating the nature and methods of God's relationship with each of us.

So let's read the passage together, and then think about it in that light.

John 3: 14-21

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” John 3: 16 is often thought of as the most memorable summation of the entire Gospel, the entire good news of Jesus Christ in a few immortal words. And that's fair enough: its depths will never be exhausted. And when we include the verses with which it is surrounded, and peer into those depths, I think we can discover the Gospel's answer to the question we're considering today.

Sometimes the Christian message is presented in such a way as to make it seem like God and Jesus represented two almost opposing attitudes towards the world – that God was the harsh proponent of justice and Jesus the soft advocate of love; and that the life and ministry and especially the death of Jesus on the cross somehow changed the attitude of God: that it mollified His anger or satisfied His thirst for judgment.

But what our passage shows is that God has never changed, that the entire plan of redemption was His all along. Jesus did not change God's mind; Jesus reflected God's mind; He was not God's opponent, He was God's agent. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...”

And the same words speak directly to our question this morning. The wellspring of God's redemptive sacrifice was love: For God so loved the world...

And what is ‘the world’? It’s not the planet earth. It’s not some particular nation like Israel. It’s not humanity: there’s no such thing as humanity: you can scour every corner of the planet throughout history, and you will never discover anything called “humanity”, What you will instead discover are people, individual people. That’s whom ‘the world’ refers to. And not just some of those people. Not just the good people, not just the church-going people, not just the people who love God or obey God or worship God or know God – God loves the world, God loves every single individual human being . As Saint Augustine once wrote: “God loves each one of us as if there was only one of us to love.”

And so we have answered part one of our question of why Jesus instructs us to think of God as our parent. God loves each and every one of us as surely as mother or father ever loved their child.

And when we turn to the matter of preparation, we find the same assurance. The method of preparation is revealed in the strange image used in our passage of Jesus being lifted up as the bronze snake was lifted up in the wilderness for the Israelites as they sought their way towards the Promised land that we read about in our passage from the book of Numbers.

*<sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in Him should <sup>[a]</sup>not perish but have eternal life.*

As loving parents provide the means and encouragement to their beloved child for its life ahead in the world, so God has provided us with the means and encouragement for our life in eternity. God has lifted up His beloved on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, and lifted him up from the grave, so that he might provide his Holy Spirit as our guide and support in flourishing in the eternal life of heaven.

St. Paul, as he so often does, expressed this assurance best in the passage we read earlier from Ephesians:

*4But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

As the child’s part is simply to accept the provision provided by its loving parents, so our part is simply to accept the great grace provided by our heavenly Father, by

believing in the great victory of Jesus over sin and death, by dying to self and living for Christ, by accepting Him as Lord and Savior, and following Him, wherever He might bid us go.

So our God has prepared our way and given us the means of following it, just as perfectly loving parents do for their children. One thing only remains. Pure parental love at some point sets the child free, to forge its new life on its own. A full and fulfilling maturity in this world can only emerge out of our personal responsibility, out of our own freely chosen decisions and commitments. And surely this is the meaning of the cautionary imagery John uses in the final section of our Gospel reading for today. God has in Jesus provided the light of the world, the light of eternity, and then allowed us the freedom, and therefore the responsibility, for following that light.

“I am the light of the world,” Jesus says elsewhere (John 8). “He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.” Or as Paul puts it, in what might serve as the very slogan of heaven: *For freedom, Christ has set us free.*

God will not drag us into the light, or force us into the light: that would not be treating us as truly loving parents treat their children. That would be treating us as tyrants treat their subjects. Heaven is not populated by slaves; heaven is populated with free spirits forging their own individual eternal lives, free spirits freely fashioning their own distinct eternal lives after the model of the only begotten son. Through free and full and fruitful worldly lives, children glorify their parents. Through a free and full and fruitful eternal life, each one of us glorifies God.

And so our prayer for this morning’s message, heavenly Father, is that you keep us mindful of your abiding love for each of us, the love that sent your beloved Son to guide the way for us back to you, to strengthen us on our journey, and to prepare a place of perfect freedom for us in your heavenly realm, and we offer this prayer in his precious name. Amen.