Sunday, June 16, 2002
WHO IS MY FATHER?
Luke 15:11-24

Whether or not Jesus ever asked the question, “Who is my father?” I do not know. I do know that one day he asked, “Who is my mother?” He didn’t ask that question because he didn’t know who his biological mother was, but as a rhetorical response when someone reported to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside and want to speak with you.” It was then that Jesus replied, “Who is my mother and who are my brothers and sisters? Those who do the will of God are my mother, brothers, and sisters.” He used the moment as a teaching opportunity. He was reminding his listeners that, in addition to each one of us having a biological or birth mother, there are other ways that you can be a mother, brother, or sister to each other.

I’m convinced that if it had been his earthly father Joseph and one or more of his brothers who had sent a message that they needed to speak with him, Jesus would then have asked, “Who is my father and who are my brothers and sisters?” And then given a similar rhetorical answer: “Those who do the will of God are my father, brothers, and sisters.”

It’s not unusual for each one of you to ask, “Who is my father?” If you’re like me, you have or have had many fathers: a biological father, one or more spiritual fathers, and grandfathers. If you were adopted, you have an adoptive father in addition to your biological father, and maybe a stepfather. You could even have a surrogate father, and if you’re married, a father-in-law.

Who is my father? If you consider yourself as having been created in God’s image and therefore as being a child of God, one historical metaphor for God is the word “Father.” Every time you pray the Lord’s Prayer, you begin, “Our Father.” In fact, in the New Testament, the word “Father” as a metaphor for God is used 150 times. Jesus used the metaphor most frequently in speaking of God as being his Father, and he used it in very personal and intimate ways. “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If you know me, you will know my Father also.”

I believe Jesus could speak in very personal terms of God as being like a father because of the good experience he had with his earthly father, Joseph. According to the New Testament stories, Joseph was a “just man” and, in addition, very loving and caring. He was also a man of deep religious faith and a mystic. He experienced God frequently in his dreams.

The metaphor of God being like a loving father does not work for everyone. There are no doubt some of you who may have difficulty in thinking of God as being like a loving father because your own life experience with your biological father, stepfather, or adoptive father has not been that positive. On Mother’s Day, I told the story of Judge Robert Van Pelt, who was raised by his mother because his father deserted her before he was born. He and I never talked about it, but it would seem to me that the metaphor of God being like a loving mother would’ve made more sense to him.

Joseph, Jesus’ father, must’ve been an amazing man. First, he married an illicitly pregnant woman whom everyone seemed to think was a disgrace to the neighborhood. Then he raised Jesus so that when Jesus grew up, it was natural for him to imagine God as being like a loving father. Jesus primarily used positive images of fatherhood when talking about how to live one’s life.

Who is my father? Jesus could use the metaphor of “Father” when speaking of God because of the positive and loving relationship he had with Joseph. It is a tribute to Joseph that Jesus constantly used the metaphor of “Father” when speaking of God and to God. He considered God to be the ultimate source of love and care.

The nature of God’s loving “Fatherhood” can be seen most clearly in many of the parables that Jesus told. The most telling example is the character of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In fact, a better title for this story is the “Parable of the Waiting and Loving Father.” You know the story — how the father forgave and welcomed his son back into the household with no reservations or conditions. You also know how the father equally loved the older brother in the same way. Although the parable as Jesus told it doesn’t say it specifically, I believe that when the father ran to meet the son when he saw him coming in the distance, he hugged him, and there were many tears in his eyes. It reminds me of the third verse in the hymn, “Bring Many Names”: “Warm Father God, hugging every child, feeling all the strains of human living, caring and forgiving, till we’re reconciled.” The father didn’t wait until the son was at the door; he ran to meet him. He didn’t say to his son, “You’re welcome back, but only under these conditions.”

Jesus wants you to understand that God’s father-love is like that. It is unconditional and never-ending, and your love for one another is to be the same. That’s why Jesus said in another place, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Even though our own fatherhood and motherhood are at best a dim reflection of the fatherhood and motherhood of God, they are often the basis from which our children begin to understand the love of God. Frederick Buechner wrote: “When a child is born, a father is born. A mother is born too, of course, but at least for her it’s a gradual process. Body and soul, she has nine months to get used to what’s happening. But even for the best-prepared father, it happens all at once.”

The greatest compliment one can pay to anyone is to say, “You have shown me the love of God.”

Who is my father? In his book, The Manger Is Empty, Walter Wangerin Jr. tells the story of what mercy and compassion did in his relationship as a father to his young adopted son, Matthew, and how that helped both of them to understand more fully the loving fatherhood of God.

When his son Matthew was in the 2nd grade, Wangerin discovered that he was stealing comic books from the local library. When he asked Matthew where he got the comic books, Matthew lied and said that he had checked them out of the library. But the following fall, Wangerin discovered Matthew had stolen some comic books from a drugstore in another city while they were visiting there a few months earlier. It was impossible to return them, so this time, Wangerin burned the comic books in the fireplace while Matthew watched. Once more, Matthew promised that he would never steal comic books again.

A year later, Matthew broke his promise and went back to stealing comic books. A third time. He hadn’t changed. Wangerin came to the reluctant conclusion that he now had no choice but to punish his son in a way he had never done before. Here’s how he described what happened in his own words:

“‘Matthew, go to my study. Wait for me. I’m going to spank you.’ Wordlessly he went. He closed the door. And we both waited while in my head I planned the event ahead of me. Nothing should be done in anger, nothing in passion purely.

“So I went into my study, where Matthew sat small in the largest chair, his face both down and distant from me. The separation killed me. The child was mute in mystery. Then how could I reach his soul?

“I spanked him. He did not cry. Then I carried him back to his chair, put him down, and told him that I would leave him alone for a while, but that I would be back. Alone, I thought, because if he should cry, he could do it in privacy, but without the sense that I wanted to see his tears. Matthew, however, wasn’t crying. I left the room. And then I burst into tears. Oh, this was more than I could stand. I bowed down, covered my face, and sobbed. Matthew’s mother came to see what the matter was, but I could only hug her and lean on her and not speak. I was so sorry, so frightened and sorry. In a few moments, I was quiet. I went to my study again. Discipline could not be over with the pain. Something better had to follow — and if I had touched my son to hurt him, it seemed necessary to touch him again in kindness.

“So I sat and recited again, all over again, the thing that had been wrong, the thing that should be right. And I said, ‘I love you. I love you, Matthew. I will never not love you.’ And then I got up and hugged him. I hugged him very hard.

“Never, never again did the boy steal comic books or any other thing. What wasn’t true, however, was how I thought the change had occurred in my son.

“Years after that spanking, Matthew and his mother were driving home from the shopping center. They were discussing things that had happened in the past. The topic of comic books came up. They talked of how he used to steal them, and of how long the practice continued. Matthew said, ‘But you know, Mom, I haven’t stolen comic books for a long, long time.’ His mother said, ‘I know.’

“Matthew then asked, ‘Do you know why I stopped stealing?’ ‘Sure,’ said his mother, ‘because Dad spanked you.’ ‘No, Mom,’ said Matthew. He shook his head at his mother’s mistake. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I stopped stealing comic books because Dad cried.’”

God’s mercy and compassion. Let it be so for all of us. Amen.