

June 18 - Fathers Day

This is Father's Day: one of those days we recognize the important place of parents, fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers, in our lives, as we grow up AND as we continue to live the fullness of our lives. Today we recognize and say thank you to our fathers.

I have the privilege of working with Bruce Johnson on the board of Camp Lake Louise. Bruce is an inspiration in many ways: owner of the Holland CapTrust financial investment firm, he lives his faith. Several times each year he takes mission trips to India; he and his wife give generously to ministry in the name of Christ. Life hasn't always been easy for Bruce, his brother Brian and for their sister. During the Vietnam War, their father served as a pilot. His plane was shot down and, to this day, remains MIA, missing in action. Recently, Bruce was asked to reflect on what he would have like to hear from his father, had his father been a part of his life when he was a teenager. Bruce's three statements were the starting point for this message.

But before we get to his three statements, I'd like to hear how you would answer two questions.

- ◆ What would you have liked to hear your father tell you, when you were growing up?
- ◆ If your father is, or were, still alive today, what would you like to hear your father tell you now?

These are Bruce's three statements:

- ◆ *I love you* – no matter what, you are so important to me. I love you.
- ◆ *I believe in you* – you may struggle to figure out what you want to do, what you want to be. You may try, and try again and fall short of achieving your goals. Some days, you may feel as though all you can do is fail. But I believe in you. I believe you have what it takes to 1

achieve your goals. I believe you are able to become the best possible person you can be. I believe in you.

- ◆ *I'm proud of you* – Yes, there are choices you have made that hurt you and sometimes hurt others. Yes, there are those times when you gave up too quickly; you stopped living who you are and tried on others' behaviors, behaviors that didn't fit you and weren't helpful to you. But I want you to understand that no matter what, I am proud of you, the person you are inside. No matter what, I am proud to be your father. I am proud of you.

As I reflected on Bruce's three statements, statements he could never hear because his father was missing in a war, I reflected on my own dad. I added a statement, actually a question I wish he had asked:

- ◆ *How can I be more a part of your life?* I absorbed my dad's love of music. I absorbed his work ethic: "Make yourself useful as well as ornamental" was one of his many "life sayings." I heard it often. Yet, there was one thing more I would have liked for him to say: "how can I be more a part of your life?" By the time the last two of us children were born, family dynamics had changed. Being part of the family was still important, investing in the work of the farm was essential. But when it came to my school activities, to my life off the farm, I don't remember my dad engaging very often. How can I be more a part of your life?

Then I asked one of my children what she would have liked to hear from her dad. Her response was also a question,

- ◆ *How can I help you?* I was intrigued. Her father coached her traveling softball team for two summers when she was in high school. And I wondered if her question was incomplete. Perhaps the question could be phrased, "How can I help you become the person you're meant to be?" There are two parts to this:

being proud of his daughter, believing in his daughter, loving his daughter—the three statements Bruce would have liked to hear from his father—AND “what do I need to do as a father to encourage you and enable you to develop into the unique person you are, rather than the person I think you should be?” Recognizing, as a father, that our children are not carbon copies of ourselves. Recognizing, as a father, that being present with our children is a life-long commitment. How can I help you?

These are the five statements some of us would like a father to say to his children:

- ◆ I love you
- ◆ I believe in you
- ◆ I’m proud of you
- ◆ How can I be more a part of your life?
- ◆ How can I help you by being present and assisting you to become the best possible person you are meant to be.

Perhaps some of them overlap, yet, each is important.

Recently I was listening to men recount their experiences as fathers on a radio program. One man’s story began the day after the couple’s daughter was born. His wife wanted a particular flavor of Italian soda, which was available at the Whole Foods store not far from the hospital. Of course, the new dad was eager to make the quick trip for his wife. At the Whole Foods store, music was playing in the background, as it does at just about every store we visit. The new dad found the aisle with Italian soda and selected the desired flavor. As he turned to leave, the background music became clearer to him: Stevie Wonder’s “Isn’t She Lovely;” the lyrics took on new meaning: “Isn’t she lovely, isn’t she wonderful, Isn’t she precious, less than one minute old....” He broke down in tears. A voice on the loudspeaker said, “We have an incident in Aisle 7.” The new dad looked around, he was the only **3**

person in Aisle 7, and he kept weeping. Soon a very young clerk came, stammered an offer of help, then left. A short time passed; now it was the burly manager asking if he could help. The new dad, standing in Aisle 7 weeping, said, “My wife and I have a new daughter, she arrived yesterday. And I just recognized the song playing on your sound system.” The manager also listened. Suddenly the new dad in Aisle 7, weeping, was caught in a bear hug and the manager was weeping on his shoulder. Between sobs, the manager said, “Our daughter is just 3 months old....”

If we can love so deeply and so powerfully, as these two new dads love, how much MORE does God love us?

In the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Jesus teaches us about “your Father, which is in heaven.” He also refers to “my Father.” Sometimes Jesus simply refers to “the Father.”

My Father: In saying “My Father,” Jesus demonstrated his special relationship with God, the Father. He demonstrated two truths:

- ◆ Jesus and the Father are one
John 10:29-30 – Jesus was telling the Pharisees that the Father had given this flock, these people, to him to care for and that no one can “snatch them out of his hand” for “The Father and I are one.”
- ◆ As children of God, we are to follow Jesus’ example in our relationship with the Father
--Jesus came to do the will of the Father
John 6:38,40 – for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me... This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day.”
As Jesus chose, we too are to do the Father’s will, not our own

--Jesus went off to pray, often
Matthew 14:23 – he sent the crowds away and went up on the mountain to pray alone
Mark 1:35 – In the early morning, Jesus left the house to go to a secluded place to pray
Luke 5:12 – Jesus would often slip away to the wilderness and pray
Jesus had an abiding relationship with his Father and took time to be in relationship, as should we: spend time with our Heavenly Father

Your Father:

If we can love so deeply and so powerfully, as those two new dads love, or perhaps as you have experienced, how much MORE does God love us?

Jesus answers this question for us in Matthew 7:11
– when a child asks for bread, who would give that child a stone; or when the child asks for fish, who would give a snake? “If you know how to give good gifts to your children – you humans who are imperfect – how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

God provides for us; out of our gratitude, we are to put our heavenly Father first

Again, Jesus teaches us of the Father’s love and provision
Matthew 6:25-34 – We are not to worry, about what we wear, what we are to eat. God takes care of the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, the grass of the field
Aren’t we of more value than the birds, the lilies, the grass?

Verses 32b-34 conclude Jesus’ teaching: “your Heavenly Father knows you need all these things. Strive first for the kingdom of God, God’s righteousness, and all these will be given to you

Jesus said, “My Father.” He taught us about “your Father.” And then there is the one use of “Our Father.” We prayed it this morning: Our Father in heaven.

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Jesus used this term only in teaching the disciples about prayer, beginning in Matthew 6:9 and also in Luke 11:2.

“Our Father:” God isn’t confined to being solely my Father, or solely your Father. When we pray this prayer, we are acknowledging we live in community. We are acknowledging we are a part of the Father’s family. We’re in this together.

One more way we address God the Father: as “Abba”

Some of you will catch the humor when I say this Abba did not sing Dancing Queen, did not come from Sweden and did not wear very colorful outfits, at least that we are aware of!

The Father is addressed as Abba only three times, that I could find, in the New Testament.

- ◆ Jesus used the name in Mark 14:36: Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, praying, Judas would come soon to bring soldiers to arrest Jesus. “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible, remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want.”
- ◆ In Romans 8:15-16, Paul writes, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are a child of God....”
- ◆ And once more, in Galatians 4:6-7 “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

“Abba” –The word *Abba* is an Aramaic word; Aramaic was the language commonly spoken by the Jews of Jesus time. This Aramaic word, according to what I read, could most closely be translated as “Daddy.” Apparently, it was a common term that young children would use to address their fathers. It suggests a close, intimate relationship as that of a father and his child, as well as the childlike trust that a young child puts in his “daddy.”

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“Abba” - not a distant, cold, disapproving authority figure waiting for us to do something wrong so we can be punished.

“Abba” – a loving caregiver, seeking our well-being and offering love, confidence in us, pride in us, with us as a significant part of our lives, present to help us.

If our Father, our Abba, loves us this much and provides for us AND identifies us as his heirs, how do we respond?

We respond to overwhelming love with overflowing gratitude.

- ◆ We express our gratitude to our Abba, by telling others of this source of love, this source of all they need
Matthew 5:46 “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”
- ◆ We express our gratitude to our Abba, by caring for the fatherless here on earth
 - Nine times in Deuteronomy, the book of laws, care for the stranger, the fatherless and the widow are mentioned.
 - Again in Jeremiah, in Hosea, and in Zechariah, the Israelites were reminded of their duty to the stranger, the fatherless and the widow.
 - One of our scriptures today, Psalm 68:5-6, also reminds us God is a father to the fatherless.

I mentioned Bruce Johnson at the beginning of this message. Bruce and his brother Brian have responded to these verses calling us to remember the fatherless. A couple of years ago, they began the Psalm 68:5 initiative at Camp Lake Louise. Campers without a father in the home are offered a full scholarship to attend a week of camp. The need is great: 2014 statistics indicate 25% of all children are growing up without a father present. What Bruce and Brian saw as a need, based on their own experience growing up without a father, has become a ministry focus of four summer youth camps: Camp Lake Louise and one other in Michigan and 7

two camps in Texas, where Brian lives. A 501(c)(3) foundation receives money to make full scholarships possible. This year 95 campers registered at CLL will receive these scholarships—and the camp season is just starting!

Each of us needs to find our own way of responding to the overwhelming love of our Father with our own overflowing gratitude!

In closing, if you have any doubts about the Father’s love, re-read the parable of the lost son (also called the Prodigal Son) in Luke 15:11-32. Remember the story: a young man takes his fortune and leaves home, believing he is better off on his own. In time, he squanders the fortune and is left to work a demeaning job feeding swine, pigs. Then the story says, “he came to his senses,” realizing that even his father’s servants have food to eat and a place to sleep. The young man returns home, hoping only to be given a job. Instead, his father welcomes him with a robe, a ring, sandals and a party, “What was once lost, has been found” exclaims the father in great joy.

This father, our Father, our Abba tells us his children:

- ◆ I love you
- ◆ I believe in you
- ◆ I’m proud of you
- ◆ I want to be a significant part of your life
- ◆ I want to help you

What an Abba!

