

December 25, 2022 – Galatians 4:1-7 & John 1:1-18

Last weekend, my wife and daughter gave me an amazing Christmas present. One of the best Christmas presents I have ever received. But it wasn't overly expensive. It wasn't some hi-tech gadget or gizmo. It wasn't especially impressive at all. It was just a t-shirt.

This t-shirt had two things on it. First, it had a picture of Bandit, from the children's TV show “Bluey” on it. And below that picture it had the word “Dad.” Just like they present him at the beginning of every episode.

Bandit is one of my favorite television characters. Because he is both a source of inspiration and also highly relatable. He's inspiring because he's a great dad. A dad who understands his kids. Who plays them in ways that make their imaginations soar. Who is constantly teaching them life lessons and pushing them to grow. Who is goofy and funny and dorky in all the best ways.

But he's still very relatable. Because he's not perfect. He struggles to balance work and home life. He struggles to be patient with his sometimes exasperating children. He struggles to know and to do the right thing in difficult situations. He's a great dad, but he's not a perfect dad. I like Bandit a lot. I'd like to be more like Bandit. Imperfect though he is.

Fatherhood – parenthood – is like that. A constant search for good role models and good parenting practices. A constant desire to improve yourself for the sake of your children, but really having no idea what that improvement looks like until you see it in another dad. And then say, “Yes, that's the dad I want to be.”

A father's relationship with his children is incredibly important to their emotional and social well-being. A good father can mold his children into healthy, productive, God-fearing members of the church and society as a whole. A bad father can scar his children for life. And there are countless studies and reports about the negative effects of children who have no father at all.

In our midweek Advent series this year, we have explored three different father-and-son relationships found in the Old Testament. Complex relationships between sinful men and their sinful children. All of which ended in disappointment and often in tragedy.

Cain, the son of Adam, was not the promised Savior that Adam and Eve hoped that he would be. Rather, he continued in his father's sin, becoming the first man among many who would commit murder and kill his own brother, Abel.

Ishmael, the son of Abraham, was not the promised son either. Abraham and Sarah thought that they had to take matters into their own hands in order to produce an heir for Abraham. But they soon learned the folly of not trusting God and trying to do on their own something that only God could do.

Absalom, the son of David, despite his father's great love for him, ended up disappointing his father as well, rebelling against him and losing his life in the process.

All three of these stories help point us to the most complicated father-son relationship of all time. The story of God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth, and the children He created: us.

Like Cain, we have not lived up to the expectations given to us in the Ten Commandments and have become murderers through our sinful thoughts and words and actions. Like the story of Ishmael, we have tried to take matters into our own hands, thinking that our good works will earn God's love and favor. But our efforts are doomed to fall short and drive us further away from God. Like Absalom, we have rebelled against our heavenly Father and King, wanting to rule our own lives instead. But this will only lead to death and condemnation.

Rather than trust in our heavenly Father's guidance, which is always good and wise, we prefer to place our trust in political figures, or military might, or in ourselves to find salvation in this life. Rather than listen to the truth that our heavenly Father speaks to us, we prefer to listen and place our confidence in the opinion of others. Our story is a story of wayward and stubborn children who have a Father who is even more stubbornly pursuing us out of His great love.

As I pointed out a few weeks ago, it's a story that Jesus summarizes in the parable of the prodigal son. Who essentially tells his father that he wishes he were dead. Then takes every good gift his father ever gave him and abandons his home and family, in order to squander it in sin. Only when he's starving and alone, sitting in the filth of his sin and near death, does he finally realize what he gave up to have this so-called "freedom."

He returns to his father, hoping only to be accepted as a slave. But he's welcomed back with joy and forgiveness. Though he disowned his father and his family, he's welcomed back as a son. As one who was dead and is alive again. One who was lost and now is found. And the father throws a great feast of celebration that his son is home. It's a wonderful story of God's fatherly forgiveness and grace.

But there's more to the story. There's another son that we didn't talk about. For the prodigal son was the younger son. And he had an older brother. An older brother who was obedient and responsible. Diligent and humble. An older brother who never asked for anything from his father. Not even the simple luxury of a small party with his friends.

So when he sees the great feast his father is throwing for his younger brother he is indignant. How dare his father welcome his brother back, like nothing ever happened. How dare he celebrate this younger son's sin and debauchery. How dare he rejoice after all this foolish child has wasted.

He's furious at the injustice of it all. And I think more than a few of us would react the same way in his shoes. Because it isn't just. There's nothing just about the father's forgiveness. Grace isn't fair. It is supremely unfair. That's the point. Grace is compassionate. Grace is loving. Grace is merciful. Grace doesn't enslave us in our sins, even if we deserve it. Grace sets us free.

In our sinfulness, with hard sinful hearts that always want mercy for ourselves and justice for everyone else, we don't see that. But there was a son who did see that: Jesus.

You see everything that the elder son lacked in the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus fulfilled. He was the elder son of the father. The only-begotten Son of God. Perfectly obedient. Perfectly responsible. Perfectly diligent. Perfectly humble.

He came to this earth and emptied himself entirely taking on the form of a servant. There was no party for him and his friends. No, he was born of a woman, born under the law. Born into poverty. Born a stable. And he lived a life of absolute, complete submission to his father's will. All the way up until that point when he knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane and said, "Not my will, but thine be done."

And then he died. He died for his younger brother. He died for us. The son who did everything his father asked died for the son who disowned his family and squandered everything they had given him. There was nothing just about it. And if we really understand that, then we should absolutely be the first to say that our salvation is unfair.

But Jesus didn't do it for the sake of fairness or justice. He did it out of compassion. He did it out of grace. He did it out of mercy.

*"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."* Not justice and wrath. Not the Law that came from Moses. Grace and truth. That was Jesus' whole purpose. To give us the grace of God and the truth of his promises.

*“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”* The elder son died for the younger son that the younger son might be part of the family again. Reborn as children of God. Reborn in the image of our elder brother. He was born under the law to redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive adoption as sons.

And that, from Him, we might learn obedience and responsibility, diligence and humility. But also that we might learn from him compassion and grace and mercy. That we might receive the grace and truth of the Word made flesh who died for us that we might live again.

The relationship between God the Father and us, his children, is a complicated one. Not because God is an imperfect father, but because we are very imperfect children. Yet, it's a relationship restored through our brother, Jesus Christ. The only begotten son of God. Whose birth we celebrate today. For in that birth the glory of God is revealed. And our family – the family of God – is made whole once again. Amen.