

The waiting Father

Sermon by Marcel Rebai

Father! What do we associate with this term, with this title, with the state of fatherhood? Trust, protection, strength, longing for security, acceptance, belonging; but also pain, disappointment, anger and bitterness.

Fatherhood is a mystery we must discover over and over again because it pertains to all of us existentially. It is so existential that Jesus made God's fatherhood the starting point for all true prayer when we come before God. "This is how you should pray: 'Our father in heaven'..." (Mt. 6:9). Unless someone grasps and experiences God's fatherhood, he will ultimately never find himself and inner peace. Therefore we can never strive enough for God's spirit to reveal to us what it means that God is our father.

We will consider two texts concerning this issue. "It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love (New American Standard: "He loved them to the end"). The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (John 13:1-15).

The second text: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate" (Luke 15:11-24). (We have left out the section about the older son because it needs to be considered separately.)

We know the story of the lost son only too well. It is one of the stories we have all heard many times, from Sunday school to confirmation class, then role-played in youth groups; quite apart from sermons on the subject. It really is a very pivotal story! But it is usually told from the son's point of view. We are struck by his rebellion, his downfall, his pitiful situation in the pigsty and his remorse. And this certainly is moving! Nevertheless, I don't want to call this story "The Prodigal Son", but "The Waiting Father". Normally we consider the son the central figure, both when he left home and when he returned, and we understand the celebration as a party for the son who returned.

The father's humiliation

I believe that Jesus told this story not primarily to emphasize the son's situation, but to emphasize the nature of the father. For Jesus, the father was the central figure. He came to reveal the father. His life said, "See what a father God is!" The story of the son, the fact that someone could choose such a path, was easy for an audience to understand. Wherever they looked, this was a reality. Every father who was standing there could say that such a situation was nothing unusual. They were familiar with rebellion, opposition and disappointment over their sons. Many of them had such a son themselves or they knew of one among their acquaintances. The novel aspect of this story was what Jesus said about the father. Here we see a father who first of all lets himself be humiliated. We see a father who was willing to be demeaned, wounded and derided.

In order to understand the ignominy of the father's humiliation we have to consider the cultural context of the time.

Dividing inheritance was an open matter. It wasn't done secretly! This son just took it and left. In other words, the father had officially distributed the inheritance. So the rift between father and son was open. Everyone could see that the son had left and dishonoured his father. In oriental culture no father would put up with such behaviour. What sounds so straightforward to us was an outrage in the listeners' ears. Their attention was caught from square one. They asked themselves how such a thing was possible. No father would let himself be humiliated like the one in Jesus' story. I think they were all eager to hear how this father would react. How would this continue? A father who let himself be demeaned? What on earth would motivate him to suffer such personal degradation?

The vulnerable God

At first, the answer is obvious for all of us who are Bible-trained. This father allows himself to be hurt and humiliated because his very being is love. There is no other reason for him to put up with such loss of face. In our world love is inextricably interwoven with suffering. Without exaggerating we can say: "In this world, to love is to suffer".

For we read, "Darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples" (Is. 60:2) and "The thoughts of man's heart were only evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5).

Jesus came to seek, to love and to save the lost, the spoiled and the afflicted with guilt. Love for us who are lost and laden with guilt brought him inconceivable suffering and ultimately death.

Because God is love, the possibility of suffering existed even before man's fall and I believe that God himself did suffer. He was wounded and degraded by his own creation, not least in the rebellion of one of his most senior angels, Lucifer. I believe it hurt God to see that one of his creatures could misinterpret his nature, his thoughts and his goals for creation to such an extent that he thought he could find more fulfilment outside a relationship with God.

Turning away from God is fundamentally pride, and there is nothing which wounds more than pride and arrogance. Arrogance is to believe that I can make more of my life on my own than God intended for me. It is an absolutely tragic but also lethal misunderstanding to assume that I can gain more by lifting myself above God than by obedience. Pride became the essence of Lucifer's character. The arrogance of putting one's own view of life above God's word hurts God deeply.

God compels no one

If God had wanted to be invulnerable he would have had to remove from creation the possibility of saying "No" to him, the creator; and that he did not do. God is love, and no one can be press-ganged into loving. Not even God can do that! The possibility of choosing to say "No" is always the possibility that love will suffer. That is what happened to God. In this

story of the waiting father Jesus said, "Look, because the father is love, he is abased and lets himself be wounded."

It is in the nature of genuine love that, if it seeks and loves the other for his own sake, this will mean suffering. This is true of love between man and woman, of parents' love for their children and vice versa, of love between friends. It is true of every sort of love in this world and especially of God's love for us. Wherever we find misunderstanding in the beloved, wherever there is pride and arrogance, love will suffer because the beloved is ultimately focussed on himself, using and misusing his relationship merely as a source of "raw material" to build himself up. There is no way to express love without going through and accepting such suffering. For we live in a fallen creation with damaged hearts, which need salvation and healing.

It is important for us to understand that in God's relationship with us he is not separate above everything. He is an involved one who really suffers, because he loves. He suffers over every one of us. He suffers with our narrowness, our untruthfulness, our cowardice, our pride, our egoism, our lust for a good position. God suffers because he does not dissociate himself from us, because he can cope with being misunderstood. He would not have to be subjected to pain if he turned away from us. We are the ones who tend to turn away and cut ourselves off as soon as we are hurt or disappointed.

"He loved them to the end"

John 13 helps us to understand why it is said of Jesus, "Having loved his own... he loved them to the end." This love goes to the utmost! But what does "to the end" mean? What end? We know that Jesus was aware of who his disciples were and what they could do. He knew that Peter would deny him. He knew that when he would most need his disciples' support - during his struggle in Gethsemane and on the cross - all but one would desert him in order to save their own skins. He knew that all those alongside him, with whom he had shared his life, to whom he had opened his heart to show them the father, would in the end demonstrate cowardice and betrayal. Jesus had no illusions about his disciples, just as the father in our story had no illusions about a son who had publicly dishonoured and left him. When it says "he loved them to the end" it means that in full knowledge of their hearts and of what they would sink to, he still would not cut himself off from them.

Because God is love he hates evil, sin, pride. But he does not estrange himself from weakness, need and misery. As long as there is still a spark of hope in us, he will not disconnect himself from us. It is not a coincidence that it is written of Jesus, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out until ... he will bring forth (God's) justice" (Is. 42:3). This is good news for us to know that God the father will not dissociate himself from us, no matter what we do, no matter what happens to us. For he knows about all of it. And we know that because he is love, he is willing to put up with everything until we begin to change, as we read in 1 Cor. 13:7, "Love bears all things, believes all things (even when we no longer believe), endures all things."

In the story of the lost son Jesus described our heavenly father, who is this love which loves whatever, who is not embittered over our pride our arrogance and our faithlessness; this love which keeps watching expectantly and untiringly every day for our return. In the midst of his grief and shame, the father holds the door open for our return home. He is mocked and scorned, wrongly deemed powerless, disdained as stunting or even harming for human development, a projection of human fantasy. He waits outside the barricaded human hearts, outside the gates of the world until we leave our pigsties to come back to him. He takes us in his arms joyfully, inspite of all our stench and filth.

Do we who call ourselves his sons and daughters go out to bear his disgrace with him (Hebr. 13:13)? Or are we like the older son who also abandons the father to his disgraced waiting so that when the younger brother returns he cannot even share the father's joy? What

heartache this causes the father, as well! What a misperception of his character! The older son begins reciting all his own demands and merits. He assumes he has to struggle for his place and his rights. A stream of verbal accusations and resentment, revealing massive alienation, is dumped on the father.

We older sons and daughters are often very quick to calculate and justify ourselves. Because, tragically, we so often serve primarily for rewards, we can hardly bear it when we encounter God's goodness which alone can lead to repentance and return. The groundless, extravagant goodness of God, which receives the latest arrival with the same generosity as the earliest, becomes a stumbling block ("an evil eye", as God's word says) to us if the father's love has not yet taken control of our heart.

In the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:11-6) Jesus makes us painfully aware of this. As long as we have blocked Jesus from leading us to the heart of the father, we will know the father only from a distance, by second hand hearsay. We will view the world, brothers and sisters with an "evil eye" which sees all the good and all the blessing in others' lives through envy, resentment and mistrust. We will be quick to suppose that God and others have acted from impure motives. Thus, the father cannot share his joy with us, no matter how much he longs to. The father's love seeks to liberate us from our prejudiced evil eye so that he can flood us with his joy.

"For they do not know what they do"

Now back to our story. The father lets his son leave! Mutely he lets him go. We are reminded of Jesus' words, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34). At first this seems as if he is excusing them. But that is not the case. It is no light matter when we do not know what we are doing. If someone doesn't know what he's doing he cannot be taken seriously. Those who don't know what they're doing are either very small children or mentally handicapped people who do not behave in a way suitable to their age. Not to know what they do, even though they could have known, causes the father agony. Those who crucified Jesus, or the son who left the father, could have known what the father is like because he reveals himself every day through his care, his goodness and his love. In Rom. 1:20 we read, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

It is arrogance and pride which so darken and restrict our senses that we are incapable of figuring God out. Pride, egoism and arrogance destroy our senses and harden our hearts until they become numb and loveless stones. But even then this love does not give up! Thus Jesus, who knows the heart of the father, prays, "Father, forgive them!" Jesus knows that the father is able to turn hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. The father does not renounce hope even though by waiting he makes himself a laughing-stock in the eyes of all his own creation. He tolerates this and others say, "How can you keep on waiting every day for such a man! Look how utterly rotten this son is. He dishonours you and wounds you in front of everyone. He takes your money and squanders it. He wastes your fortune without any pangs of conscience!"

I imagine that the angels are often deeply ashamed of the way we treat the father; that they who know what he is really like cannot get over the fact that he puts up with such disgraceful behaviour. And yet, the father does put up with it!

Repentance through God's goodness

Then repentance comes. The son's repentance is the fruit of the waiting father's suffering. It was God's goodness and mercy which not only kept the son alive but finally also led him to repent, as God's word says (Rom. 2:4). Then the son is received in his father's house.

If we are sons and daughters of this father and live close to his heart, our goodness will also make it possible for others to repent of broken relationships. Then we too will bring the message after a broken relationship - whether a friendship, a marriage, or parent-child and other family relationships - that there is a way back home. Identifying with this message of goodness and forgiveness will involve suffering. But it will make restoration and healing possible and create lasting fruit which honours the father.

If you reach a point where you cannot go on, when no one wants you and you don't know where to turn, then you should know that you can return to the heavenly father at any time! No matter what happens to you, you can return! God permitted himself to be a laughing-stock in just this way. He let all the honour due him be trampled underfoot in order to keep the door open for this son. That is grace. That is what Paul meant when he wrote, "Do you not realize that God's goodness leads you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4) This is the goodness which throughout everything reminds us that we have a home!

Leaving ourselves to God

When this goodness reached its goal, and the son who had outwardly and inwardly landed in the gutter finally remembered his home, he said, "I'll go back to my father!" His first thoughts were of remorse and repentance. "I'm no longer worthy to be called your son!" That is correct, for we are all unworthy to be called his sons and daughters. But this repentance and contrition did not last long. Soon the son began giving his father advice. "Make me one of your servants!" Hardly have we taken the first step back to the father's house than we begin imagining how God should treat us. "I want you to make me one of your servants because I'm no longer worthy to be called your son!" That sounds so good and humble, but deep down it is pride. "I will judge myself a bit in order to demonstrate that I'm not so bad and still know my place."

We know this attitude. It often comes in the form of self-accusation and self-judgment. It immediately begins "helping God out" and telling him what he should think of us - instead of wholly entrusting ourselves to this father and simply saying, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

God knows how to treat us without our advice. We need not come to the father with any of our own resolutions and projects. It is enough simply to listen to him and say, "I turn myself over to you. Do whatever you want with me. No matter what you do with me, I will thank you. I am willing to accept everything. I will accept anything, if only your will is fulfilled in me. Then I will seek nothing further, my God. I place my soul in your hands. I give it to you, my God, with all the love of my heart because I love you and because this love drives me to dedicate myself to you, to put myself in your hands, without limits, with boundless trust. For you are my father!" (Charles de Foucauld). That is unconditional repentance.

Because Paul had grasped that, he wrote, "I care very little if I am judged by... any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself" (1 Cor. 4:3). For he knew that this would be meaningless and would actually be pride. God is the only one who judges us. He is the one who carries out the judgment - not we ourselves. Thank God for that!

The story of the prodigal son demonstrates the way the heavenly father deals with this. "His father saw him... ran to his son, and threw his arms around him." This is the wonderful thing. Before the son could say a word he experienced the father's mercy and saw that this love was genuine through and through; he experienced that the father was not too proud to express his joy, or even to abandon himself to it, to throw his arms around his son. Here at last one might expect the father to show a bit of dignity so that everyone could see that he had some self-respect and was waiting for a minimal gesture of apology from the son. Nothing like it! He even ran toward his son as soon as he saw him.

In the culture where this story was set, it was inappropriate for a father to show emotions in such a way. Running toward someone is really not worthy of a person of authority. But out of love this father put aside all reservation and dignity in order to express unmistakably, "You are expected! I have waited for you!"

Perhaps you have heard the impressive story from China about a certain son who similarly wanted to return home. It illustrates this parable well. A father was waiting for his son. The son had left home for the city in order to earn money. He had left his father, who needed him, alone and sad. The son had known that he was leaving a bruised relationship behind him. He spent a few unsuccessful years in the city and instead of coming back home proudly, he ended up in the gutter. Then he decided to return to his father on the farm. But he remembered how he had left and didn't have the necessary courage. So he wrote to his father that he would travel by train and if he wanted him back, his father should hang a white cloth in a certain tree in the garden.

Then he set out. As the train neared his village, he asked the man sitting next to him to look out of the window to see whether there was a white cloth hanging from a certain tree. He closed his eyes in apprehension. Finally his fellow traveller answered that he couldn't see a tree with one white cloth on it, but there was a tree covered with white cloths. The father had obviously been waiting impatiently for his son!

Matt. 7:11 tells us, "If you, then, who are evil, know how to wait for (give good gifts to) your children, how much more will your Father in heaven wait for his children (give good gifts to those who ask him)!"

The celebration

Then the celebration began. This celebration is for each one of us who returns home. What joy! The father said, "Let's celebrate!" After the father had put his arms around him, the son had a chance to repent. And while he was still repenting, the father had already proceeded to the celebration. This, too, is mercy. The father can make clear to us, "Look, that's enough! You don't have to tell me all the rest; you needn't tell me what I should do." Repentance always restores relationships, leading to joy and finally the celebration.

This is a celebration of the father, who wants to rejoice over his son. It is not the son who is the centre of this celebration. The father gives the party because he is so happy that his love, which reached out to the uttermost, ultimately brought this son back to life. The father even stated that the son was dead and now lived again! The love which continues to the end will raise people from the dead. It will create abundant life such as Jesus had. Jesus himself loved his disciples until the end, so much so that the denier Peter later became one of the chief Apostles.

This is ultimately the resurrection from the dead, the creation of new life. All of this takes place through the love which perseveres to the end! Above all, let us ponder what tremendous good news it is that we have such a father!
Amen.

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