

LESSONS IN FAITH

Hebrews 11:1-2

I heard about a father that sent his daughter an email stating that he was depositing the \$10 she asked for into her account. "But I must call attention to a spelling error in your last email. 10 is written with one zero, not two." Dads like to try to watch the bottom line. The problem is though we keep watching it, we seldom seem to have any control over it.

One young fellow said his Dad must have been a pretty devious kid when he was young. "Why?" asked his friend. "Because he always knows exactly what questions to ask when he wants to know what I've been doing." We do, don't we? We know...because we did most of those things ourselves.

I love the Mark Twain quote. You've heard it many times. "When I was 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have him around. When I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years."

This is Father's Day. Someone said Mother's Day and Father's Day are pretty much alike except you buy a much cheaper gift on Father's Day. Actually I don't think that's true at all. Most of us fathers are very blessed and we receive a lot of love and attention and great expressions of our children's love and appreciation. And we really do appreciate it.

This is a day to appreciate what our fathers have meant to us. I suppose we have all had fathers. Some are still living, some are not. Some were great fathers and role models and examples of faith in God for us. Some were not. Some of us perhaps have wanted to be like our fathers, maybe some of you had to vow to not be like certain parts of your father. I often remind myself that there are always reasons why everyone behaves the way they do. If your father was not the loving, caring, nurturing father, present when you needed him, I hope you have been able to forgive him. There were reasons he was the way he was.

There are some things I learned well from my father and some things I didn't learn so well. I didn't learn to build things the way he did. My father loved to build things. He loved to rebuild cars and houses. He built a couple of houses. That was his hobby. He loved to build. Somehow I didn't get any of that.

My Dad also loved desserts. He still does. I did learn that. He also had a strong work ethic. I think that's the nice way of putting it. He loved to stay busy. We boys used to imitate him by saying, "Let's get to work!" He taught us to work. We were always gainfully employed doing something it seems like. Working on some project. I did learn that.

But there are some things my Dad taught me about life and about a relationship with God that I also hope I have gained from him and am passing on to my children and to those around me.

One of those is an **optimistic view of life**. Most of the time Dad tried to look on the bright side of things. When one of his churches was going through a tough situation he was good at pointing out how these things could work out for the good. He encouraged his churches to try new things believing that something good would come out of it. Every time I received a new appointment in my career as a pastor, he loved to recount the positives about the new situation I was going to. Dad always believed that eventually things would work out. It reminds me of something the legendary football coach, Vince Lombardi once said. He made the statement one day that he had never lost a game. Immediately someone in the audience interrupted him and said, "Wait coach. I know you lost some games. How about the time the Cowboys beat you 45 – 0?" Coach Lombardi replied, "I didn't lose that game. I just ran out of time!" A person with a positive outlook and a positive spirit continues to believe that if they have a little more time things are going to work out. They put into practice that promise found in Romans 8: *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,"* (Romans 8:28).

My Dad also had a **sense of humor**. He knew how to laugh at things and laugh at himself. He loved to reminisce about things that he and his friends did in college and in seminary. They were much crazier then than he was when I was growing up. I loved to watch him imitate some of his professors when he was with his friends. They would tell stories of taking someone's car apart and putting it together again in their dorm room. They were nuts. But Dad also knew how to laugh and have fun with people in lots of situations. The proverb says that "laughter is good medicine for the soul." Most of us need to learn to do that more. I am grateful for fathers that teach us how to laugh. To laugh at ourselves and to laugh at the problems of life realizing how amazingly small they are in the larger scheme of things.

Dad also taught me about **courage**. You never saw Dad afraid. I'm sure he must have had fear now and then. I believe everyone has some things that cause them fear. There is bound to be something you are afraid of. If nothing else, don't you have a little fear of snakes? Especially if you come up on one on a trail or something and don't see it until you are right on it. Someone said that courage is not the absence of fear. It is just knowing what to do in the face of fear. It is having a plan of action. It is being prepared so that when you do face something that seems ominous or overwhelming, you know how to respond.

A few weeks ago Rudy Guilliani was in Greensboro. I got to hear him speak. He said that as mayor of New York they had gone over lots of contingency plans for all kinds of emergencies. But when September 11, 2001 occurred and the twin towers were hit by the two planes, there was nothing that had prepared them for that. As he walked down the street to the towers that were smoking, one of the first things he saw was a body jumping off the top of one of the towers. What kind of tragedy would cause someone to

decide they would rather jump off a building to their death rather than face something else? He said at that moment he knew they didn't have a plan for anything as big as this. They had to come up with a different game plan. After everything was over he said what he realized was that everything they did was from lots of different plans that they had created for other situations. The evacuation plans, the rescue plans, the communication plans, the protection of other institution plans, everything that they did were things they had already planned for other kinds of situations. They just put them all together in this one very different catastrophe.

Fathers are leaders. And leaders show their strength and courage by following plans. They know what God's plans are and they calmly and confidently lead their families with the plans that God has given them. God says in Jeremiah 29, "*For I know the plans I have for you,*" declares the Lord, "*plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future,*" (Jeremiah 29:11). Good fathers make it a point to know that and believe that. They know about God's plans and they strive to know in advance what His plans are for them and their family. They know that God is always loving and kind and wants what is always best for them. And then in hope and faith, they do everything they can to follow the plan God has laid out for them.

That verse goes on with more advice for fathers. "*Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,*" declares the Lord, "*and will bring you back from captivity,*" (Jeremiah 29:12-14a). You know what that is? That is the basis of a spiritual life. "Call upon me." "Come and pray to me." "Seek me (with your heart)." "You will find me." "I will bring you back from captivity." That is the spiritual path for all of us. And it is the way a father becomes a spiritual leader in the home. It all begins with our relationship with our heavenly father. And out of that relationship, everything else falls into place. That affects the way we relate to our spouses and to our children. It affects the way we behave at work and the way we do our work. At the heart of every father should be the heart of their heavenly Father. And that's what I saw in my father.

My father was also a great **lover of people**. He loved people everywhere he went. A great big smile spreads across his face, even today when he runs into someone he knows. My Dad seems to have friends everywhere I go. "Oh, we know your father," people will say. "He is such a nice person." They love him, because he loves them.

I always get a big kick out of the story of the man who heard the pastor say that men needed to tell their wives they loved them. And he said, "Why?" I told her I loved her when I married her and if I ever changed my mind, I would let her know." There is another story about a couple that had been to see a marriage counselor. After listening to them for an hour the counselor realized that one of the things missing in their marriage was public displays of affection. He told the husband that his wife needed to be kissed more often and he gently placed a light kiss on her cheek to demonstrate. The husband looked a bit confused and thought for a minute and then said, "All right, if you say so. I guess I can bring her in here on Wednesdays and Fridays."

Gary Chapman wrote about the different love languages that we have. Some more naturally demonstrate their love through physical touch, and some through words of affirmation or words of encouragement. . Some do it more naturally through acts of service and some through giving gifts. Others show their love more naturally through quality time. Each of us has a way of showing love that comes more natural for us. But the goal of every one of us is to be more loving in all our relationships.

The Bible says that we love because God first loved us. Love has to come from the heart. The only way we can really love in a deep and sincere way, is to love from the heart. And the only way we can love from the heart is for the heart to first be opened to God's love. The heart has to be broken. The heart has to be opened.

When the subject of sacrifice came up, David reminded us that the sacrifice God is really looking for is a broken spirit and a contrite heart: *"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise,"* (Psalm 51:16-17). That is the way God sometimes gets us to the place where we can really love from the heart. The heart has to go through a "breaking." We sometimes have to go through a very difficult experience in order to get to the place of contrition, to the place where the heart becomes contrite. And then we are able to receive God's love in a way that we have never experienced it before. And finally we discover what it means to love people from the heart.

My Dad taught me lots of things. But the thing I guess I learned most from him about God and our relationship with God was **faith in God**, and how to live a **faithful life**. My Dad was a man of strong convictions. He was a man of incredible faith. He exhibited strong beliefs. He believed in God and he believed in the church. He gave his life to the church. He showed me that when all else fails, you still have your beliefs.

I heard a story about two traveling angels that stopped to spend the night in the home of a wealthy family. The family was rude and refused to let the angels stay in their guest room. Instead the angels were given a space in the basement. As they made their bed on the floor, the older angel saw a hole in the wall and repaired it. When the younger angel asked why, the older angel replied, "Things aren't always what they seem."

The next night the pair came to rest at the house of a very poor, but very hospitable farmer and his wife. After sharing what little food they had, the couple let the angels sleep in their bed where they could have a good night's rest. When the sun came up the next morning the angels found the farmer and his wife in tears. Their only cow, whose milk had been their sole income, lay dead in the field. The younger angel was infuriated and asked the older angel, "How could you have let this happen? The first man had everything, yet you helped him. The second family had little but was willing to share everything, and you let their cow die.

"Things aren't always what they seem," the older angel replied. "When we stayed in the basement of the mansion, I noticed there was gold stored in that hole in the wall.

Since the owner was so obsessed with greed and unwilling to share his good fortune, I sealed the wall so he wouldn't find it. Then last night as we slept in the farmer's bed, the angel of death came for his wife. I gave her the cow instead. Things aren't always what they seem."

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for," (Hebrews 11:1-2).

Make it so Lord, make it so. Lord we thank you for our fathers. Thank you for their courage and sacrifice, for their hard work and their love, even when they couldn't always show it in ways that we might have wanted. Thank you for their love for us and their faith in you. And Lord make each of us strong in our faith. Make us spiritual leaders. Give us positive and optimistic spirits. And help us to both receive your love in the depths of our hearts and share that love with those around us. Amen.