



feeding...gathering...carrying...leading. (Isiah 40:11)

Dearest family,

We are in a series in Acts but it was hard on Father's Day this past Sunday not to make mention of something to do with fatherhood. Acts is not the book you would probably first go to for such a message, given that it is primarily a narrative of events. However, it should be noted that the first words of Jesus that are quoted are these: "Wait for the gift my **Father** promised." (1:4) This is then affirmed in the first sermon of the New Testament church when Peter says: "He has received from the **Father** the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear." (2:33) This is utterly consistent with the emphasis of the gospels on the primacy of the Father. Everything that happens in Acts is premised on what the Father promised. We talk about it as a move of the Spirit but it is in fact a Father movement. As we read about the beginning of the church and its mission we should not forget that one of the ways that the purposes of God through redemptive history are described is found in Hebrews 2:10 where it talks about God's plan to "bring many sons and daughters to glory." The Book of Acts is about this paternal plan in full operation.

We are all clear about our need to be blessed by the Father, but how does the Father need to be blessed by His sons and daughters? The answer to that question is embedded in the less preached parable of the two sons, the one, not in Luke 15, but in Matthew 21. When asked to work in the vineyard by the father, the first son said that he would not, but did, and the second one said he would but did not. The commentarians who say this is mainly about the relationship between our profession and our practice have in fact missed the main point. Jesus tells us what it is about when he asked: "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" This is all about how sons bless fathers. When the crowd answered "The first" Jesus did not disagree that despite initially reneging on his obedience, he was still a true son. The actions of the sons in response to the father would not be because the father laid down the law about what they would have to do, but because he directed them out of fatherly love. His command to them was premised on his love for them, and the assumption is that their obedience is premised on their love for him.

This has already been established incontrovertibly in the teaching of Jesus prior to Holy Week. John's gospel is infused with it, with over 120 references to the Father, but you find this repeated intertwining theme. Listen to it. "If you love Me you will obey Me." (John 14:15) "If you love Me you will obey My teaching." (John 14:23) "If you obey My commands you will remain in My love." (John 15:10) But Jesus prefaced all these comments by stating that anything and everything that He taught and commanded was not His but the Father's. It was all about loving and obeying the Father. John represents this in his epistles. "If anyone obeys His word, God's love (the Father's love) is truly made complete in him." (1 John 2:5) Obedience is therefore seen not as obeying rules but living in relationship with the Father as a true son and daughter. "Those who obey His commands abide in Him and He in them." (1 John 3:24) This is all about intimacy. "You are my friends if you do what I command." (John 15:14-15) Such obedience is not burdensome: not because the demands of the commands are easy, but because love delights in obedience. Your affections for the Father become the true measure of your obedience and vice versa. John's final summary word: "This is love for God: to obey His commands." (1 John 5:3) Our obedience of the Father is a response of love. Our love for the father is a motivator and encourager of our obedience. The bottom line is that it is impossible to separate love and obedience.

This parable cannot be a cute little story just about being sure that you practice what you preach. Jesus is saying this to His murderers. He is certainly not helping His cause. He is on the doorstep of His death in three days' time, and the greatest demonstration ever of the love and authority of the father and of the obedience of the son. Was not Jesus the son about to be obedient even unto death? No one said that obedience was easy or immediately desirable, not even Jesus. Are any of us perfect sons, or ideal sons, who always say "Yes" and always do the right thing immediately? Is our obedience always instantly automatic? Are we programmed to obey without a millisecond of delay or denial, of pain or pressure, of

fear or fury? Like the first son, we do know the right thing to do for the Father, and like him we know the power of our hesitations, and the power of our capacities to procrastinate. It is clear that it was not because he wanted to do the work that he eventually did it. The text says he changed his mind, and Jesus specifically relates that later to the repentance of the prostitutes. The son repented of the estrangement of relationship with the father, of the failure to give the father what the father wanted and needed from him as a son, and consequently, he obeyed. I would argue that his obedience is not now a second class obedience that doesn't really count because he messed up so badly the first time and should have repented and obeyed earlier, and so was destined to be a second-class son with less hope for a trusting and joyful and assured relationship with his father.

This is all about relationship, not just authority. If it was just about the authority to command obedience, it would not be a father we are dealing with here but a master. The father who commands the son here has kindness still. He does not stand around and lose his cool and harangue the son, or co-erce him, or throw the book at him. He does not react badly to his bad reactions. The father simply leaves the son, no doubt with a heavy heart. The psalmist writes, "*As a father is kind to his children ... He knows what we are made of*" (Psalm 103:13-14) This means He knows where we struggle in our sonship and where we dither and dawdle and procrastinate and where we find obedience costly and hard. He knows when we generally don't look a bit like obedient sons. I think we can relate equally to the second son, when we know what the correct responses should be, what the righteous behaviors should be, and we mouth the "Yes, Lord" because we are not necessarily hard-heartedly refusing to obey, and we don't really want to show disdain for the father through our disobedience, but we do it anyway, by neglect, by oversight, by forgetfulness, by distraction, by cultivating other loves that have our hearts more than the father does. We don't wake up in the morning intending to engage in rebellious disobedience or in a willful rejection of the Father's will, yet we find ourselves in places of disobedience, usually well-camouflaged so it doesn't appear so utterly contrary to the responses of a true son or daughter. I mentioned some of these camouflages on Sunday: compliance, compromise, partial or conditional obedience, presumption, procrastination, incomplete or unfinished obedience.

There is something about that recovery of the first son that is full of hope for us in the recovery of our true sonship and daughterhood relationship with the father, and our capacity to bless the Father through our obedience. Let's be clear. There are many calls to obedience that are unhelpful, unpalatable, and even undesirable to us. Jesus was obedient to death. Is death desirable? The scriptures (Hebrews 5:5-7) tell us that Jesus learned His obedience through the things that He suffered. It is the same context that tells us that He offered His Gethsemane petitions with loud cries and tears. It was for the joy of loving His Father, and for the joy set before Him that He obediently endured, but in Jesus' example we are shown the need we have to be able to express our hearts to Father when we are struggling with the demands of obedience. The command to sexual purity is not an easy one in this cultural context. There is a process of struggle sometimes. Gethsemane gives us this poignant insight in to a true father-son relationship as we see Jesus being able to talk it out with the Father. He is free to ask the Father if another way is possible, but the process frees Him to come to that profession of a true son, "*Not my will but yours be done.*" Like Jesus, we have to know that we can trust the Father with the credibility gap between what we would prefer and what He prescribes. Because love and obedience only make sense together, the enemy of our souls will do everything to separate them, so that obedience, the acts never feels like a response of love – but of compliance or fear, not trust or love for the Father.

On this past Father's day, I don't know what son you most identified with. Maybe both for different reasons. Are there "No's" that your heart is saying to what feels like the difficult will of the Lord, and there is a delay in your relationship with Father and with his vineyard, that this denial is fueling. Are there "Yes's" that you have given, even at an altar rail, that have become mired in the procrastination that is rooted in unhealed brokenness, in unresolved distrust, or anger, or humiliation, or perceived injustice. Are you stuck and unable to move towards Father's call to trust him? So what is the big general point? Simply to understand that our obedience is what our Father desires and needs as a father. I'm asking you to understand obedience in the context of your relationship with your heavenly Father. It's how we give the Father our blessing.

Pastorally yours,
Stuart