

YOUR FATHER'S GOOD PLEASURE

This story is told by Rob Elder of Salem, Oregon. It happened on a communion Sunday, a few years back. The associate pastor had gathered the children for story time at the front of the church. He was wearing his wireless microphone, talking to them about the power of God. What do you do when you need a concrete illustration of things that are not concrete? For better or worse, he had decided to use the battery in his wireless microphone as a representation of the invisible power of God, hoping they could make the jump from there to a new comprehension.

So in a voice booming over the loudspeaker high overhead, he said, "And kids, do you know the power that helps us to hear the worship service on Sundays?" Of course, the associate pastor had turned up the volume a little to make the contrast more dramatic. Then, with a flourish, he removed the battery from the wireless unit he was using. With the last echoes of his question still ringing through the sanctuary, the receiver in the sound system, robbed suddenly of its signal, began to search the airways for another signal to broadcast. Well, the system picked up the worship service from the Catholic church across the street. The Mass was in full stride, and the priest was at that very moment going down the row of kneeling worshippers, handing out the communion elements.

So in answer to the associate minister's question, "Do you know the power that helps us to hear the worship service on Sundays?" came the true reply, distinctly and eerily from above, over and over: "The body of Christ ... the body of Christ ... the body of Christ ..."

I suppose that in this congregation we could still argue about the actual implications of such an obvious revelation from above. Was it merely a coincidence, or did the Holy Spirit decide to take a hand? ("Hey followers, any time you're willing to turn off your own sound, I'll be waiting.") Does "the body of Christ" in this context refer to the strength and support of the community of believers, or are we to conclude that it is the sacrifice on the Cross which is the power that helps us to HEAR?

Well my friends, what is the power that keeps *us* going these days? What is the power that lights your way when you rise in the morning?

What is the power that keeps you smiling and striving when the stress, frustration, and anxiety of the day get heavy and wearing? What is the power that brings you to worship? What is the power that keeps life a beautiful gift within you, even in the midst of a world where all things wither and twist and perish? What is the power that keeps you feeling valuable, once you recognize your place among the privileged few, in a world so full of injustice and need? What is the power that keeps you hopeful and courageous, even when things seem to be going wrong?

“The body of Christ ... the body of Christ ... the body of Christ.” Yes, I suppose so; indeed I do. But only because behind that – *revealed* by that – is the true caring, the true power: the love of God.

I remember the first time (many years ago) that I saw a musical called *Carousel*. I didn't like it. It was too painful for me. Despite my great admiration for John Raitt, it was hard to sit through. It seemed too dumb a story to be moving me so. Why couldn't the hero just straighten up, get his life together, and stop trying to take all the stupid shortcuts? Then all the bad things wouldn't have to happen. Only, he wouldn't straighten up. He was a jerk. But I was the one who had to sit there and feel all the pathos for him – endure the agony of the theme – because no matter how thin the plot or cheaply touched the emotions, the theme was powerful: a father wanting to give something good to his daughter.

There are only about seven plots in the world, I am told. All the rest are endless variations on these same themes. One of them, surely, is parents wanting to do something good for their children.

Sometimes people speak of how whole empires have been won or lost or thrown away for a woman. We usually get to hear about Delilah and Bathsheba, or Helen of Troy and Cleopatra and a dozen others, before we get to the one the person really wants to talk about. Far more empires, of every kind and description, are built and defended and expanded for the children. I do not mean the general concern of a society, or groups within a society, for the welfare of the children; that is a powerful force in its own right. I mean the personal desire, the passion, the motive power of the vast majority of parents to do something wonderful, generous, outstanding, outlandish for their children – and not just once, but over and over. Only wisdom prevents some parents from ruining their children with this overwhelming desire to give good things to them. It has become a truism, in the case of

fathers, that often they work all their lives to build an inheritance to give to their children, hoping it will somehow say what they themselves were never able to say. People can spit on that as much as they like, but the motive power is still among the strongest in the world. It is my own private theory that if you scratch beneath the surface, the majority of what our world calls “greed” is actually coming from this desire to give something wonderful to the children.

Sometimes grown children come to me and are concerned about taking gifts from their parents. They wonder if maybe it's too selfish of them, or if it will somehow backfire later on. I always ask, “Are there strings attached? Is there a control issue going on?” “No,” most of them say. “They just keep wanting to give me things. It makes me nervous. They have done so much for me already, and I can make it on my own now. And besides, I should be doing more for them now ...” To which I then say: “YOU don't understand! If you don't need it, take it *for them*. They have been trying to bless you all these years, sometimes in ways you didn't even notice. If you stop receiving now, it will feel like rejection to them – a pulling away. ‘I don't need you’ feels like ‘I don't want you.’ Say ‘Thank you,’ love 'em a lot, be grateful – but keep receiving the gifts. Giving to you is one of the top pleasures in their lives!”

Do you connect? Do you connect enough to feel and hear Jesus? “*It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*” If you will not receive, it is like a rejection. *It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.* God really wants to, and is really eager about it – far more excited about it, actually, than you are. (That's because God knows a lot more about the Kingdom than we do.)

Of course, like some of you, I have trouble believing this simple-sounding (at first) statement. But it is what Jesus frequently and adamantly tells us. It is, from one perspective, what Jesus lived and died to tell us. Say what we like about the church or any of His imperfect followers, the Message has fascinated the world – and it fascinates individuals still – to wonder if Jesus is right and true about this. If He is, we are all fools to worry so, and life is wonderful and there isn't a problem anywhere that is more than a temporary snag on the way to eternity. If He is, we carry our complexes, fears, compulsions, and shame so very unnecessarily. And all the energy we spend sitting around judging and evaluating each other, and arguing about who is right – how strange it all looks in the light of such news. And if not? If not, then

life is short and nothing matters very much anyway. On with the mayhem – we are in charge, for a little while, and then it's all over.

I am a father. I know what it feels like to want to give good things to my children. It is a hunger I can neither define nor justify. It is almost painful to want something so much and be so concerned (worried) lest it backfire in some way if I am careless or mindless about it. And maybe it will anyway, no matter how careful I am. Is that concern – *lest it backfire in some way* – a dim reflection of how God feels toward us? Oh my God! I mean, “Oh my, so sorry we make it so hard for you, dear God.”

Just as an aside – not really part of this sermon: Does it cross your mind what an amazing statement this really is? What manner of tiny little human being has the effrontery – the audacity – to speak for God in this manner? Especially in a world with so much evidence to the contrary. Where does Jesus get the right – the authority – to speak for Yahweh with such confidence, with such outlandish familiarity? And claiming a perspective so far beyond what anyone had dared to think or believe before. Who could have imagined such constructs and concepts, never mind claiming them to be true with certainty and conviction? Jesus knows Abba *this* well?! Has a right to speak such things for God in front of the whole world? I can barely believe it even though I am told with the whole life, death, and resurrection backing it. I cannot imagine inventing such a Message. Even if I could somehow get it to cross my mind, I cannot imagine presenting it to the world in such a way that the world would ever do more than laugh in derision or, more likely, simply ignore it and walk away.

Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Really!? How can I believe this? Actually, I have been in the process of coming to believe it all my life. But I know that as I stand here at this moment, I do not *fully* believe it. It's not that I doubt it, you see. Oh yes, I *have* doubted it in times past – every which way from Sunday, and from there through Saturday. I have doubted it, tested it, beat at it, worked at it. Its credence is no longer the issue. My mind no longer doubts the story. I play with the details, to be sure, but I do not doubt the Jesus event anymore. If you could find some way to sandblast my mind, that would be the last thing left – all I really care about, except for how I feel about some people. (And for me, those two things are inescapably connected.) So it's not that I doubt it; it's not

that I wonder if Jesus is the Christ; it's not that I wonder if He is right about the love of God. I trust Him. I assume He is right about the central revelation of His life and His coming. I believe in Him and the future He promises. On top of that, I live with a conscious and steady certainty that I will (in the common phraseology) "go to Heaven" – that I will eventually experience the Eternal Kingdom in more and more of its endless dimensions. And when I'm in a good mood, I even look forward to all the mayhem, challenge, and transformation of trying to grow into all of that. Many of you know that this is more than mere words for me, just as it is for a great many of you.

Holding on to all that, I still have to tell you that when Jesus looks me straight in the eye (so to speak) and says point-blank, "*It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom*" – well, I have not yet been able to fully receive that. My first reaction is still, "Oh dear, *now* what did I do wrong?" I quickly quell it, but that is the first reaction. The second is, "Oh dear, what do I need to be doing *now* that I have been neglecting?" The New Testament has been telling me for all these years that I do not have to earn it or deserve it – that, in fact, I cannot. The gift is too high. But that is still my reaction. I know it is because I find myself still worrying about things I wouldn't worry about if I had truly and fully received this Message, this truth. (For instance: How this church will be doing two years from now. How some of you will handle the challenges I know you are facing. Who likes me, and how much? Is it time to start a more courageous movement for helping the poor? Will the world survive the present crises? The world is always in crisis, of course; it is a broken realm. Things are always more the way they are today than they have ever been before ...)

You need not remind me, though I do not mind being reminded, that we are indeed being given the Kingdom all the time – as much as we will receive of it. I don't really think I would still be alive if that were not so.

But back to the issue: I know I haven't believed it because I keep catching myself trying to earn it – trying to do too much, trying to do more and more. Though it is not my conviction, it IS my inner attitude that we are in some kind of race against time. Or we have to keep ahead of the wolves. Or we have to keep our noses above water, as if it were rising. Where do such thoughts and attitudes come from? The Omnipotent One is consciously present and wanting to hand me all

the peace and energy of True Life that I am willing to receive, at any moment that I am willing to receive it, yet I am worried about time? About wolves at the door? About the water rising? *It is your Father's good pleasure ... "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, you will give them a stone? Or if your child asks for a fish, you will give them a scorpion? If you then, who are imperfect, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him?"* (Matthew 7:9-11) I can certainly follow the logic. But there is still that great chasm to jump at the end of it.

You see, Jesus keeps telling us that it is God's own personal desire to bless us, like a loving father wants to bless his children. But that is mind-boggling. We are so self-centered that we want to think about what *we* are like, and that always comes up "unworthy." Jesus keeps wanting us to know what *God* is like – that we are loved because that is what *God* is like. And some people are so desperate to escape this teaching that they go through every possible form of ducking and dodging: It's too anthropomorphic; God isn't really a father – not really male. Maybe Jesus didn't say these exact words, since He probably spoke in Aramaic, and this is an English translation from a Greek text. Maybe it was written in 75 A.D. instead of 70 A.D. Was Matthew really the author?

How enlightening! Does the Numinous One love you, or not? Do you trust and believe that endless gifts, blessings, and possibilities are waiting for you to receive them, because your Creator truly and deeply cares about you – or not? Well, even those of us who know and believe that it's true still do not believe it all the way, try as we will. How sad. We have been told that we must be "born anew." What they forgot to tell us is that being born of the flesh takes a few minutes, or around nine months if you put it all together; being born of the Spirit takes a lifetime, and that doesn't count the dimensions still to come.

We could give further evidence of how we do not believe this truth which, at the same time, we also believe very much. But the crowning touch, at least for me, is the growing awareness of how we sabotage the Message itself, usually without even realizing it.

It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom – but in reality, it's for all the other really deserving folk, not actually for me. I made too many mistakes, blew too many opportunities, drank too

much, got in too many quarrels, offended too many people, whatever. It's for people with more pleasing personalities. I get to work for it, and maybe cheer a little from the sidelines, but it's not really for me. (That ancient phrase echoes in my brain: "*You shall see the land, but you shall not go there.*" (Deuteronomy 32:52)) Is anyone else here familiar with these lines of thinking? I love the Message but cannot stand it full-force and head-on, so I deflect it, letting it glance over onto others.

Or perhaps: *It is my Father's good pleasure to give me the kingdom* – but only after I have accomplished a few more things, taken care of a few more obligations, maybe gotten rid of a few more bad habits and character defects that trouble me. With this thinking, we can completely defuse the Message without ever consciously disagreeing with it at all.

And an old favorite: *It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom* – after this life is over. That's the classic. Good news, but nothing to do with *now*. So then what's the point of telling us *now*? To get us to work harder, I suppose – and thereby completely undoing and even reversing the whole impact of the Message itself. Isn't that clever? Satan has to be around somewhere. I cannot find him or see him, but I can smell him: Haste, overwork, stress, fear, busyness. First let's fix everything that is wrong and everyone who is imperfect, and then we will have time for God. Oh, be careful! Your theology shapes your life. Not the one you are *supposed* to have – the one you *really* have.

Finally, I realize that I twist and mishear the very passages that tell me the Message itself. Consider this morning's very own: Luke 12:22-34. Do you know that I can actually read this passage, ponder it, study it prayerfully ... and come out the other side feeling *scolded*; feeling like it's really time for me to mend my ways; feeling like I am being accused of being too materialistic, or that I'm supposed to redouble my efforts to help those in need. It is uncanny but still true: I can absolutely reverse all the dramatic statements being made here to reassure me, to comfort me, to claim my worth and value to God. I can even miss the magnificent promise being proclaimed and come through feeling, "Woe is me, I'll never make it. I'll never live up to all the demands."

RE-LISTEN TO IT:

Do not be anxious
Why are you anxious
How much more will God clothe you
Your Father knows you need them
These things will be yours as well
Be generous, there is more where that came from
It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom

So how do we come through that barrage feeling more anxious and worried than ever? I don't know, but we do sometimes. As I have been known to complain: "If I preached to you about JOY, some of you would simply feel guilty because you don't have more joy in your lives." And then you would blame me for scolding you.

John Calvin, who has a terrible reputation in some quarters but who had a marvelous faith, was arguing with some people who were trying to convince him that "merit" is a proper word for how we are saved because Jesus often spoke of "reward" – for example, "*Great is your reward in heaven.*" (Matthew 5:12; Luke 6:23) Calvin replied: "The use of the word 'reward' is no reason to infer that our works are the cause of our salvation. First, let this be a fixed principle in our hearts, that the Kingdom of Heaven is not a servant's pay but a child's inheritance." (*Institutes* 3.18.2)

How can Jesus speak reassurance and comfort if we will not hear it and cannot accept it? He is not saying try harder. He is saying relax ... stop worrying ... unfold ... open your hands, and minds, and hearts. It is God's desire, God's passionate eagerness, God's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. God wants it for you more than you want it for yourself.

I hope this day you will each hear our Lord – with no effort on your part to deflect it – talking straight to you, at point-blank range: *It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*