

Happily a child

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Everyone likes to think that they relate well to others. So much of our life is a matter of relationships that to be a failure here would be to feel a failure everywhere. But our ability to relate to others has a lot to do with our being a child.

Is childhood ever a thing of the past? And further, is our childhood something over which we have had no control? Isn't it true that some people just happen to have a happy childhood and others a miserable one—and that others fall somewhere in between? Isn't it best to focus on the present and—if necessary—to forget the past?

Rather, being a child is important. It is important to the child of course, but it is also important to the adult—because every person remains a child. They are always the son or daughter of someone, and this relationship, this understanding of oneself, is greatly significant in every other relationship.

What has happened to us when we were children is important. More important than this is whether we learned what it is to be a child when we were a child. If there is something we failed to learn at one point in our lives, it catches up with us all along the way. What has to be learned still has to be learned, even if in our eighties. Some, who have refused to learn what was important to learn at a certain point in life, come to their old age, emotionally speaking, as children. Some are trying to cope with parenthood with matters still unresolved with their own parents.

We start life as children because we are created to be children—of God. We were never intended to be free standing, self-authenticating beings. Our life is intended to flow from the fact that God is our Father, and our parents, no matter how well they performed, have been a witness to this fact.

Somehow, somewhere, everyone must come to be happily a child—or be locked into immaturity, low self-awareness, and probably resentment and bitterness and a reaction to everything that happened when they were young. The tragedy in this is not just the human turmoil which ensues but the side-lining of God which results. For some this is worked out by turning to atheism. Others still believe in God but may never have a deep contentment which arises from being able to trust in God as Father.

Where we do not experience the love of the Father—the love of the one who has responsibility for us and authority over us—we have a constant need for a 'warm fuzzy' or an 'emotional fix'. We must be surrounded with pleasantness and prosperity. We must have escape routes from any problem which may cause us pain. Husbands may lean on their wives as a replacement mother; they may demand that

they fulfil the sexual fantasies of their childhood—or find another woman who will do so. Others need to indulge every appetite—for food or whatever. Many never become free of the opinions of others, cannot bear the strain of acting differently from peers and must have an eye to what is popular.

There is a central core of our being which must have the rich contentment of being important to a parent, but especially to the Heavenly Father—to have their approval and receive their support.

Learning 'childhood'

Let us look first at what it means to be a child of our parents. What is it important to learn about being a child?

Children need to learn to be loved. We may say that children don't need to learn this, and, in fact, that they presumptuously demand to be loved. Children may demand the fruits of being loved but I am not at all sure that they easily learn to be loved. They may be consumers—of food, of time, of affection, of resources—but they do not necessarily become aware of the fact that they are loved.

Consider the occasion when Jesus fed 5000 people, people who then wanted him to be their king, and to whom he said that they had not seen the miracle he performed. They had eaten it but they had not seen it. They wanted the fruits of his loving but they did not want him. They wanted to be served but not to be loved.

To be loved is to be in a relationship. It involves understanding that parents—or anyone else who has benefited us—have given what we received. It involves our being grateful. It means knowing that we are important to them and that what we do matters to them—so that we are eager to please them.

To be a child is to be in a relationship of submission to authority. Given the great desire that we all have to get our own way, it is not surprising if, at this point, the matter of love gets engulfed by plots and contrivances and strategies and negotiations to arrange the relationship so that we still have freedom to achieve our own ends.

Then enters another complication. Brothers and sisters. They also have their goals—and their strategies. We may well have become suspicious of their designs (the same as our own!) and developed other strategies for minimising our losses. Then also, we may have become suspicious, or persuaded, that our parents were on the side of our brothers and sisters.

All these things are so familiar—as we see them in others, and so laughable—when we see them in children, that we may be overlooking the fact that we ourselves never accepted our own childhood, and that we still carry resentments. We may be running a 'closed shop' in which we refuse to let other people entrance to our loves. We have never learned to receive love—however faultily it was delivered.

Now here is the rub. There are no perfect parents. In fact, there are many who may have been irresponsible and a smaller number who have been abusive of their position. It is doubtful, however, if any of us have been without influences of love in

our childhood. Jesus said: 'If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children...'. We have received many of these gifts—from parents or from others—which have been a witness to the reality of love—love for us in particular.

The first of the ten commandments concerning our relationships with each other says: 'Honour your mother and your father all the days of your life that it may go well with you in the land which the Lord your God gives you'. This command does not deal with parents being honourable but of the need to honour them. We will never be able to truly see what our parents have been or have done for us until we learn to honour them. It may turn out that they have done far more than our narrowed view would allow us to see. The point is, it was not just our parents or siblings who were sinners! We may have reasons for wanting to shut out some of the evidence as to whether we have been loved by others.

Let me return to an earlier point. Not to have a rich experience of love—from parents, or a surrogate parent or relative, and certainly from God, is to be sadly deformed as a human being. And now we have seen that we may have allowed the sins of others, and sins of our own, to have closed us off to the experiences that have been available to us.

We must now open the subject up further. If being loved was just a matter of parents and children, that would be one thing—and we could do many things, and in fact do many things, to improve our relationships. But there is more to life than this.

We are born into families because our Creator is Father. The task of parents is to witness to the Fatherhood of God. What we should have gained from our childhood is that we are richly loved by God—provided for, instructed, disciplined, rescued, encouraged, launched into life and provided with a goal. But God has not left the action of parents as the sole witness to this. In fact, if parents have come anywhere near doing what they can do, they would mostly be eager to bear witness to what God has done—apart from them—to save and restore them and their children.

Consider what God has done to bring us to a full and rich knowledge of his Fatherhood.

Finding the Father through the Son

It must be the most remarkable fact of history that the eternal God, the Father, has revealed himself to us in his Son. It is not the purpose of this article to pursue this point. I must simply affirm that it is what the Church has always known and taught. It is the light which has shone into our otherwise dark world. We do well to pay heed to it. We do well to pay heed to it particularly in this matter of whether we are loved or otherwise. Much depends on knowing and receiving what God has done in this regard.

Jesus, the Son of God, said that he lived in the love of his Father. Here is the source of his wonderfully rich life as a human being. He never questioned that his Father loved him, appreciated him, provided for him, guided him, entrusted him with his purpose and would secure his person—even in death.

We may evade the remarkable nature of this by saying that he was the Son of God and never had reason to complain about his parents. But he was brought up by Mary and Joseph. He had younger half-brothers and sisters who later seemed suspicious of his fame. But he saw through the sinfulness of his human environment—without any sins of his own—and recognised the witness to his heavenly Father. He also had the witness of Israel—again, a sinful Israel—to the great deeds of his Heavenly Father. So, in submission to his parents, he grew in stature, and in favour with God and man.

Now here is the good news. Jesus Christ knew the love of the Father—for himself and for us as well—and knowing the reality of all this in his own person, he gave himself up for us so that we might know that we are the ones the Father loves. He was the one who deserved his Father's affection but he knew that his Father loved us. He knew that the defect in our knowing was not occasioned by his Father—or by our parents—but by our sinfulness.

Many parents have been puzzled as to why their children did not respond to the love they believe they showed. They may be blind to the overbearing nature of their 'loving'. But God has commended his love to us in the giving up of his Son. He has clearly demonstrated his love to us—so that we have no valid reason for not recognising it. That is the way it will be so regarded on the day when all secrets are laid bare.

The love of the Father is proclaimed to us by the Son. He has demonstrated this love to us as one who was receiving it. There is no depth of the Father's affections that was unknown to the Son. There was no purpose to which he remained a stranger. There was nothing he knew about his Father with which he disagreed. He honoured the holiness of his Father and accepted the judgements of his Father against a rebel race. He knew the plan that he should be made an offering for sin—and he gave his back to the smiters and did not complain when he was crucified. All this was for his Father—and he knew that his Father was for us.

Love comes to us at this point, and not at any other finally. It is when we see Jesus bearing our sins, attracting to himself the wrath which we fear, that we understand that we are loved—by God.

In this way, God's love has been directed toward us—in the directing of wrath away from us, and, onto the Son of his love. In addition to all the gifts of creation and of providence, and in order to awaken us to them, God freely proclaims forgiveness to us—in the name of his Son.

Jesus returned to his Father, but now, with merits sufficient to encompass us sinners. All who trust in Christ are received with the Son in full honour—as sons and daughters of God. The Holy Spirit is poured out specifically so that we may cry out 'Abba' or 'Father'. This is not a cry of anguish but of filial trust and readiness to obey. Nothing else in this world can replace this—no person, no experience, no status, no possession.

So, we actually know the Father. More than that, we know that we are known by him (Gal. 4:9)—known as his children. We are no longer aliens, no longer timid or fearful.

We have the all too heavy burden of ultimate responsibility for all things taken from us—especially the burden of our sins and the burden of correcting the sins of others. We bear instead, the gentle ‘yoke’ of Christ, the longing for the Father’s rule over all things. We find ourselves teachable and ready for any good work.

In all this, we are never alone. For us, ‘there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist.’ He is ‘above all and through all and in all’ (I Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6). There could hardly be anything more necessary to life than to know that the Creator is our Father, and that we, reconciled, have his active presence in every experience of our lives.

Israel’s priests were to pray that the light of God’s face would shine on his people, to give them peace. For us, the light of God’s glory has shone—in our hearts—in the face of Christ. In the face of Christ, who has given himself up for our sins, we see reflected the love the Father bears to us. This is sonship!

Receive the love of the Father!

The forbidding images of God in our minds are a lie. The doubts and deferrals we cherish are a subterfuge—to retain our autonomy. The haughty cry of the world that its ‘god’ doesn’t care, or exist, is no better than the hoot of a ghost complaining that death is not too bad after all. What has the world got when it rejects the love of its Father!

Our refusal to know love has been a refusal to know God. Our objections about our parents may well be valid, but we could be using them as an excuse to keep the witness to God’s love at bay. Our maintaining of coolness in familial and other relationships is our denial that God can restore us to the experience of his love. On the other hand, if we, today, would thank God for the gifts given to us by our parents, we may be surprised also at the giving of God that would open up to our receptive minds.

There is an urgency in the call to receive the love of the Father revealed in the Son. ‘See to it that none fail to receive the grace of God and by it a root of bitterness spring up whereby many become defiled.’ ‘. . . we should love one another and not become like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives’

Jesus never outgrew the need for his Father’s love. He never desired to know anything beyond the affection of his Father. In this sense, he remained a child. It was because he remained a child, or Son, of his Father’s love, that he became a man—rich in affections, strong in purpose, clear in perception—and unwilling to condemn others. The love of the Father found in him a willing recipient, and an eager exponent.

Because he was sensitive to the love of the Father, Jesus could also receive the love of others around him—with all its limitations. He received, not only the love of his parents, but also the love of the Mary who anointed his feet. He sought the love of Peter, after Peter had denied him. It matters to Christ today that we love him also. Like him, we need to receive love as it comes to us. To receive the gifts of God—as gifts—and this is to receive God who is the fountain of life.

So then, are we happily a child? Happily a child of God the Father? Happily a child of our own parents? These two loves are of one piece—because the latter is a witness to the former. This is the basic relationship and any other relationship will be warped if this one is not true. But if the love of the Father is yours—and you know that this is so—every other relationship is forever changed.

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