

Scripture Reading for 21st June 2020

John 5:16-23 (NIV: New International Version)

¹⁶ So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him.

¹⁷ In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” ¹⁸ For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

¹⁹ Jesus gave them this answer: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. ²⁰ For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed. ²¹ For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. ²² Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, ²³ that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.

John 14:8-11 (NIV)

⁸ Philip said, “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” ⁹ Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? ¹⁰ Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.

Sermon: Jesus: A Chip Off the Old Block

I heard in an interview with one of the major scriptwriters for the world's longest running TV soap opera, *Coronation Street*, which has been broadcast now for nearly 60 years – and, yes, it's shown in Canada. The scriptwriter said that the show was based on *strong* women and *weak* men! And I suspect it's not the only soap opera with that winning recipe! That got me to think about *who* would be a good role model for fathers in the Bible. I quickly discovered it's *not* easy to find one! If we look back to Abraham, he was hardly a father to Ishmael, and if you're about to sacrifice your son, Isaac, because you think God told you to do it; well, one wonders how the father-son bond can survive an experience for like that!¹ Isaac's wife, Rebekah, had twin sons, Jacob and Esau, and that was trouble from the get-go. But it was only made worse by Isaac having a favorite son, Esau, while Rebekah, favored Jacob.² Having favorites in the family is an example of terrible parenting! And that learned behavior was passed down to the next generation because Jacob also had favorites with his own children, namely Joseph and Benjamin.³ We don't know what kind of father Moses was,⁴ but there is evidence he was an absentee Dad.⁵ And there are many examples of children who were nothing like their fathers. For example: Eli was a good priest, but his two sons were corrupt priests⁶; King David's son, Absalom, turned out to be a rebel.⁷ Although these great men have left their mark in history, it can't be said that they are noted role models for fatherhood – or even as husbands! In the New Testament, Joseph appears to be an honorable husband to Mary, but we have no idea about him as a father. Jesus blessed children but had none of his own! That being the case, I realized this approach was getting me nowhere for a sermon idea for Father's Day!

My son, Philip, sent me a photo recently showing a large wooded construction that he has just made in his back garden for his three children. It's basically a park; it's got two swings and a hammock, a climbing frame with ladder, and a tubular slide. With the public parks all closed due to COVID, this is a great way for the kids to play safely and burn off their energy. I confess I felt a bit of pride, thinking that he was – after all – “a chip off the old block,” in a similar way to me and my own father, who was trained as a cabinet maker and was highly skilled in woodwork. Now I realize I may be deluding myself, and that Philip learned everything from a YouTube video, but let's not burst that bubble just yet! But this got me thinking about the expression, “a chip off the old block,” and it got me thinking about *Jesus*.

In John's gospel in particular, Jesus has the audacity to say he is just like his Father, and he *doesn't* mean Joseph, he means *God*. On the face of it, this sounds like megalomania or else being psychologically disturbed. Just what *kind* of man are we Christians following? Let's see from our readings.

¹ Gen 22:1-19. Judge Jephthah *did*, alas, foolishly sacrifice his daughter to God! (See Judges 11:30-40.)

² Gen 25:22-23, 27-28.

³ Their mother, Rachel, died in childbirth (Gen 35:18). For evidence of favouritism, see Gen 37:3; 42:4.

⁴ But one of Moses' grandsons (Jonathan) was priest who led people in the worship of idols! (See Judges 18:30-31.)

⁵ See Exod 18.

⁶ 1 Sam 2:12, 22-25.

⁷ 2 Sam 13-18.

John writes: So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him.”⁸ To what “things” does John refer? In the previous few verses,⁹ Jesus had just healed a man who was crippled for 38 years.¹⁰ You would think that would be a cause for great celebration, but the religious leaders were upset because Jesus healed the man *on the Sabbath*. As you know, there were three things that were particularly important to devout Jews, namely: circumcision, dietary restrictions, and keeping the Sabbath. Now a lifesaving mission *was* permitted on the Sabbath, but in the minds of the religious leaders, this was not a life-and-death situation. After all, if the man had been an invalid for 38 years, the healing could wait until after sundown, when the day officially ended. But, alas, these religious leaders seem to be doggedly fixated on the issue of breaking the Sabbath.¹¹ It’s not unlike that today; well-meaning Christians often create a specific litmus test that is supposedly meant to examine the genuineness of someone’s faith or belief system, and in the process, miss the whole point of the gospel!¹² Now in the other Gospels, when the religious leaders’ question Jesus’ activities on the Sabbath, he uses it to explain the *meaning* of the Sabbath.¹³ In John’s Gospel, however, Jesus uses the opportunity to reveal something about *his* identity.

John writes: “In his defense Jesus said to them, “*My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.*”¹⁴ What does this mean, after all, in Genesis we are told God *rested* on the Sabbath.¹⁵ Is Jesus contradicting the supposed words of Moses? The short answer is “no.” You see, Jewish thinkers had come to understand that that God could *not* rest on the Sabbath because creation *continued*; children were born and so new life was being given, and people died and so needed to be judged. The creative work of God never stops and Jesus says that, *like his Father*, he too is working to bring about “new life” – or healing in this case – even on the Sabbath.¹⁶ The Jewish leaders didn’t dispute that aspect of Jesus’ reply, but they were now even more upset because they understood him as making himself *equal* with God by calling God his own Father.¹⁷ Words matter here; for “*a*” to *equal* “*b*”, they must *both* be *independent* of one another. The religious leaders are therefore confused. Jesus was *not* setting himself up as an *alternative* to God, as in polytheism, or *usurping* God’s authority, and so he goes on to carefully explain what he means *without* ever using the word “equal.”¹⁸

Jesus is *not* claiming *equality* with God, but *unity* with God, and he articulates this unity in terms of a Father-Son relationship. Parents often teach their children lessons through their words and actions, and

⁸ John 5:16.

⁹ John 5:1-15.

¹⁰ John 5:5.

¹¹ See John 5:10,12,16.

¹² It is very easy for religious leaders today to reject those who challenge the conventional order/wisdom rather than see new possibilities for God being at work amongst them.

¹³ Mark 2:23-3:6, Matt 12:1-14; Luke 6:1-12.

¹⁴ John 5:17.

¹⁵ Gen 2:2-3; Exod 20:11.

¹⁶ The healing can, therefore, be considered a *sign* of the *new* creation.

¹⁷ John 5:18. Their desire to kill him was for the ultimate, unforgivable sin of blasphemy; death by stoning – Lev 24:16.

¹⁸ John 5:19-23.

they're certainly not strangers to having their children imitate them. Children often repeat what they hear and copy gestures. (I sometimes find it scary when I catch myself unconsciously exhibiting my own Dad's mannerisms!) Jesus says, "The Son can do *nothing* on his *own* initiative, but only what he sees the Father doing."¹⁹ This means Jesus is *not* independent of God. Instead, Jesus perfectly follows through with the Father's instructions. And because the Son's actions are exactly like that of the Father's actions, he is the clearest reflection of God the Father. According to John, then, Jesus understands his own identity as that of one who lives with unqualified love and obedience to the Father's will. Jesus is therefore like a faithful son who is fully-apprenticed in his Father's craft. They are *unified* in purpose and love.²⁰ Now because Jesus is utterly dependent upon the Father, and precisely because this is so, Jesus is *entrusted* with the fullness of the Father's authority both *to give life and to judge*,²¹ those two tasks that Jewish tradition agrees God does even on the Sabbath.²² Consequently, the works of Jesus in healing and in judgment are the works of the Father.²³ That's why Jesus concludes: "The one who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him."²⁴

This Father-Son relationship is a key theme in John's Gospel, but even the disciples struggled to grasp what Jesus was saying. John presents a major discourse of Jesus to his followers, just prior to his death.²⁵ After all that they had witnessed, Philip²⁶ said "Lord, show us *the Father*, and we will be content."²⁷ To see the 'glory of God' is the longing of every devout person; Moses wanted the same experience.²⁸ Incidentally, it should be noted that *all* the Gospel writers made the connection between Jesus and the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 40, where we read: "And the glory of the LORD *will be revealed*, and all people will see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."²⁹ And the glorification of Jesus is another key theme of John.³⁰ But at this point in time, Jesus simply says to Philip, "Don't you know me, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has *seen* me has *seen* the Father."³¹ Jesus goes on and effectively repeats what he said earlier to those religious leaders: "Don't you *believe* that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, *living in me*, who is doing *his* work."³² The lingering question is whether Philip and the other disciples will *believe* what Jesus has already told them given all that they

¹⁹ John 5:19; adding, "For whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise."

²⁰ Of course, we have seeds for trinitarian theology here – and in other places within John!

²¹ See John 5:20-21.

²² God does not rest from this work, because it is a fundamental part of God's character.

²³ God is working to bring life to all and, to do so, judgment is required. Judgment challenges us to say: "What you have done is wrong," and then it demands that we change our ways. Judgment can also be an active *affirmation* saying, "What you have created is good and you should continue doing it!" Both understandings are integral to the work of Jesus.

²⁴ John 5:23.

²⁵ See John 14-17.

²⁶ Philip is regarded as a key disciple in John's Gospel; he is specifically named 12 times.

²⁷ John 14:8.

²⁸ See Exod 33:18–23.

²⁹ Isa 40:5; see also John 1:23, which shows this oracle was on his mind.

³⁰ This triple "glorification" of Jesus is his being *lifted* up on the cross, *raised* from the dead, and *ascending* into heaven.

³¹ John 14:9.

³² John 14:10-11. See also John 5:36–37; 7:16–17; 10:37–38; 12:48–50.

have witnessed [“seen”]. We can only “see” Jesus today because the Holy Spirit reveals him to us. Even so, do we believe what Jesus says about himself?

In conclusion, Jesus is, then, a genuine “chip off the old block.” He reveals to us the character of God, *our* father. Indeed, in Ephesians 3 we read that every *family* in heaven and earth takes its name from [God] the *Father*, which is clever word-play as the Greek for “father” (*pater*) and “family” (*patria*) have the same root.³³ Consequently, although Jesus had no children, he is a suitable role model for Fathers because he reveals God the Father’s loving heart.

One of things to take away from this on Father’s Day is the way the Father *trusts* the Son. Of course, none of is remotely comparable with Jesus, or their unique Father-Son relationship, but the *Father trusts you and me* to do the things he would do. Consequently, reflecting on the identity of Jesus helps us to better understand *our* identity as adopted children of the Father and the vital commission we have in sharing *life* with the world. Indeed, when we follow the example of Jesus, we participate in the great work of God, which is to bring *life* to others.³⁴ And, ironically, it is in participating in that work of bringing healing, forgiveness,³⁵ and hope to others that we find fullness of life. Amen.

³³ Eph 3:15.

³⁴ Yes, this may lead questions or even criticisms, Jesus experienced that too, but we need not fear because we are not alone; God’s Spirit is with us.

³⁵ John 20:23.