



SALEM Digest

Autumn 2004 • Topics of interest to friends of Salem Christian Mental Health Association

What Kind of a Father is God?

Mark Vander Vennen

What kind of a father do you think God is? Do you find it easy and natural to pray to God the “Father”? I would say that these questions are loaded—even explosive.

Why? Because all of us have strong, deep feelings about our own fathers, and those feelings profoundly colour our sense of who God the “Father” is. Just under the surface, for each one of us, lies a deep well of emotion about our fathers.

Some of us have had very healthy, life-giving relationships with our fathers—relationships we give thanks for every day. Some of us have had mixed experiences—some wonderful, some difficult. Some fathers have been emotionally absent, unable to give approval or love, or they have abused or sexually assaulted. Far too often I’ve heard, “If God is my Father, then where was he when I was being abused! How can I pray to God the Father when he allowed my own father to violate me so profoundly!” That’s like the question, “if God cares so much for us, then why did He allow the Holocaust to happen?” These are real questions, and they cannot be easily answered or dismissed.

Being A Father Today

From a father’s perspective, being a father today can be confusing. Where are the models of fatherhood

today? For men the choices seem to be three: you can be violent and controlling. The large majority of men are repulsed by that. You can be soft and touchy-feely, almost feminized—and while becoming more feminized may be crucial for some men, in and of itself, the effemination of men satisfies



neither women nor men. Or you can be the Homer Simpson buffoon, with many variations, especially the one that has you sitting in front of the TV after work, beer in hand, more or less oblivious to the life that’s going on around you. In the 1950s the Hollywood picture of a woman was something like “I Love

Lucy”—the ditzzy redhead who could barely function in the scary world out there without being grounded and protected by her husband. Today the popular culture images are reversed: now a man cannot be grounded in even the most practical details of life and relationship without his wise and almost superhuman wife.

None of these options feel right. The truth is that there is no accepted standard for healthy fatherhood today. There is no map; there are few guidelines, few signposts pointing in this or that direction.

Pictures of God

Why then, of the many pictures the Bible uses to describe God—God is like a lion, a warrior, a healing balm, a hen gathering her chicks, male and female

together, a lover—is “Father” one of them, if “Father” can be such an obstacle, even to faith?

Remarkably, the picture of God as our *Father* is given entirely for our own good, regardless of our father or male experiences.

Who then is this *Father*?

continued on page 2

Director's Corner

Mark Vander Vennen

I am honoured to be writing these words as Salem's interim Executive Director. I have been granted a one-year leave of absence from my employment at Children's Case Coordination to assist the Salem Board, staff and membership to envision God's dream for the work of Salem.

Years ago, in a generous donation, one of Salem's supporters willed Salem some land. Salem's Board of Trustees is now working hard to develop that land in such a way that it will both serve others and generate Salem annual monies for its work of ministering to those who struggle with psychological distress or mental health issues.

Jesus calls us to minister to the world, and by way of that process he promises to minister to us. Years ago Mother Theresa, hearing that call, went to India. There she looked for people who were the most "untouchable" in that society. When she found them, she began to do God's work.

Who are our "untouchables" today? Survivors of violence? Perpetrators of violence? People dying of AIDS? Those who struggle with mental illness and its related problems, including isolation, poverty and homelessness? Children born with HIV or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, or who fail to attach? "Unadoptable" children

continued on page 4

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Editors:

Judy Cook
Marian den Boer

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RN 130566011 RR 0001

1 Young St.
Suite 512
Hamilton, ON
L8N 1T8
Telephone:
(905)528-0353
Fax:
(905)528-3562
Web:
www.salem.on.ca

God the Father

continued from page 1

Perhaps nowhere in the Bible are we given a clearer picture than in the familiar parable of the *Grieving Father and His Two Lost Sons* (also called *The Prodigal Son*).

To help understand this story, it's crucial to realize that fatherhood back then

to be a true father. When the younger son requests his inheritance, the father does not beat him, which the circle of fathers would have seen as his only honourable option. Even worse, shockingly, he grants the request. In so doing this father subjects himself to public shame and ridicule by the patriarchs of the village—perhaps even exclusion from the tight circle of elders.

...this father shatters
the rules of fatherhood
in order to be a true father.

was precisely the opposite of what it is today. There were crystal clear expectations of fathers in the ancient near East. Those expectations were carefully defined and upheld by the patriarchs of the community, the fathers of the villages, the tight circle of elders to which this father would have belonged. Any violation of the rules of fatherhood, even minor, would undermine the institution of fatherhood and be dealt with immediately and harshly.

Breaking the Rules

But the lesson of the parable is that this father shatters the rules of fatherhood in order

Then the younger son comes back home. If earlier the father had violated the code of fatherhood for the sake of his son, how much more does he do so now. The code of fatherhood in the ancient near East was very clear: a father waits at the door, even if that means the villagers beat up his son before he gets to the door—an almost certain event. Then he must demand a very exacting penance from his son. His role and dignity as a father would then be preserved—at least as much as possible under the awful circumstances.

But instead this father runs out to meet his son, against

For more on the parable, see Poet and Peasant by Kenneth Bailey (Eerdmans). For more on male issues and fathering, start with Man Enough by Frank Pittman, M.D. (Zebra Bouquet). And don't hesitate to call Salem or others to find someone to walk beside you on a path of healing.

every imaginable code of conduct in the Middle East. In *Poet and Peasant*, Kenneth Bailey quotes actual statements from Jesus' time that still hold true in the Middle East today: "A Middle East nobleman never runs." "A man's manner of walking tells you who he is." "It is most undignified for a Middle Eastern elderly man to run." "Great men never run in public." Not long ago a pastor came to a Christian church in the Middle East and was not accepted because he walked too fast.

The father has now completely lost his already shaky reputation. If before he may have been the object of sympathy, now he is the object of public shame and ridicule. He is scorned by the

every father did this, there would be chaos! You fool! Look at your Son hanging on a cross! Come down and rescue him if you love him so much! What a poor excuse for a Father!

But there on the cross is nailed, once and for all, all those false notions of fatherhood—the patriarchal, the violent, the wimpish, the absent and the bumbling. Done! They're finished! says Jesus.

Healing

Of course, even with Jesus' victory, we may still carry with us the damage done by poor or abusive fathering. Fathers, like mothers, are deeply human. But God knows that the route back to God, back home, is through

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patriarchs. They're enraged at him.

The parable tells us that God stops at nothing until we get what we need. God does this at unimaginable personal expense. He suffers public shame and humiliation. He loses his dignity, his honour, his reputation, his stateliness. See, here they come, the patriarchal powers of this world. They are lining up, arraying themselves. How could you! they yell, with balled-up fists, to this God the Father. You have betrayed us! You have undermined the institution of our power! If

our wounds, our scars, perhaps even our father-wound. As the two sons discovered, God does not rescue us from the need to confront ourselves, even with all of the pain that that entails. If you find that your father experiences interfere with your intimate relationships, speak to a trusted friend, to your pastor, or call Salem or a local trained counselor.

And let us celebrate happy and healthy fathers—the many fathers all around

continued on page 4

The Board of Salem



Christian Mental Health Association

would like to invite
all friends, supporters,
clients, and former clients

**to join us for dinner
and Salem's
Annual General Meeting**

(A free will offering will be taken.)

Date: **Saturday, October 23, 2004**

Place: 2nd Christian Ref. Church,
Brampton 444 Steeles
Avenue West, Brampton

Theme: **THE FUTURE OF SALEM**
An Interactive Presentation

Facilitator: Mark Vander Vennen

6:00 - 6:30 Gathering
Punch Bowl

6:30 - 7:15 Dinner
(Please RSVP to the Salem office by Oct. 16)

7:15 - 8:00 Theme presentation

8:00 - 8:45 Salem Christian
Mental Health
Association Business
Meeting

God the Father

continued from page 3

us who are finding their way and doing it well—even heroically, against great odds. Give thanks for precious fathers who affirm life, not only of their spouses and children, but also of their neighbours, even when that means breaking the socially accepted male norm. They are inscribing the meaning of the parable into their fathering. They know the meaning of sacrifice.

God rushes out to meet God's daughters and sons. And then God accepts us in front of the whole village, in the company of the whole assembly, completely and totally, without judgment. In full public view God gives you and me the kiss of reconciliation, the ring of relationship, the robe of royalty, the

sandals of daughterhood and sonship, and God says: you are not damaged goods. I saw you when you were an unformed child. I marvelled at you in your crib. I was

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overjoyed as you grew up. I picked you up when you fell—though it may not have seemed like it. I'm not rescuing you but I am helping

you to confront yourself. I know that the road is long and hard. But I stop at nothing, I break every rule of this world, no matter what the cost, until you get what you need. I gaze at you with awe. I approve of you and I bless you. And I love you without condition.

That's the Father that our God is.

Mark Vander Vennen, M.A., M.Ed., R.S.W. is the interim Executive Director of Salem Christian Mental Health Association.



Mark is a trained family therapist, specializing in couple work and adult male issues.

If you are experiencing . . .

- Individual or couple difficulties
- Parenting hassles or other relationship conflicts
- Depression, anxiety, or other debilitating syndromes

We can help.

For more information call: 905 - 528 - 0353
or: therapy@salem.on.ca

To book an appointment call:

Hamilton area: 905 - 528 - 0353
Bowmanville area: 905 - 623 - 9901

Salem offers qualified, professional therapy for individuals, couples and families, including inner healing prayer therapy, play therapy, and art therapy.

Confidentiality is assured.

Director's Corner

continued from page 2

whose parents are the “state”? To whom is Christ calling us to direct our God-given energy and resources?

These are the questions Salem's Board will be dealing with this year. I would love to hear your reflections and suggestions. Please email me (markvv@salem.on.ca) or contact me at the Salem office. Come to our Annual General Meeting on October 23 (see the announcement elsewhere in this issue), where this will be the topic of discussion. Or, if you are interested in being considered to join Salem's Board, contact our Board Chair, Ben Van Hoffen, via the Salem office.

And please pray that, throughout this process, all of us will be alert to the prompting of the Spirit, as together we try to listen to Jesus' dream for the work that Jesus would have his people do through Salem.