

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 17, 2012
Father's Day**

HEALING THE FATHER WOUND

Matthew 3:13-17

A "P. S." TO LAST SUNDAY'S MESSAGE

Last Sunday I talked about the mission Jesus gave us to function like salt and light in the world, serving the purposes of God and His kingdom right where we are. Right here in northern Virginia. Right here where we live and work and worship and go to school. Why? So that, through the witness of our words and our lives, we may point others to Jesus and His saving love. So that people all around us may discover that God is really real, that they may know what God is like through the witness of our lives, and, as a result, may give God the glory and honor and praise He deserves. As the Reformers of the 16th and 17th centuries would say, "*Soli Deo Gloria.*" To God alone be the glory.

Before moving on, I want to add a postscript to last Sunday's message, taken from Charles Spurgeon's book of daily devotional readings, *Morning and Evening*. Commenting on Romans 14:8, where Paul says, "If we live, we live to the Lord," Spurgeon writes: "If God had willed it, each of us might have entered heaven at the moment of conversion. It was not absolutely necessary for our preparation for (life eternal) that we should linger here (on earth). It is possible for a person to be taken to heaven, and found acceptable to be a participant in the inheritance of the saints in light, even though he (or she) has just believed in Jesus. It is true that our sanctification is a long and ongoing process, and we shall not be perfected until we lay aside our bodies and enter within the veil. Nevertheless, had the Lord so willed it, He might have changed us from imperfection to perfection and have taken us to heaven at once.

"Why then are we (still) here? Would God keep His children out of Paradise a single moment longer than necessary? Why is the army of the living God still on the battlefield when one charge might give them the victory? Why are His children still wandering here and there through a maze, when a solitary word from His lips would bring them into the center of their hopes in heaven? The answer is – (we) are here that (we) may *live to the Lord*, and may bring others to know His love. We remain on earth as sowers to scatter the good seed (of the gospel); as plowmen to break up the fallow ground; as heralds publishing salvation. We are here as the 'salt of the earth,' to be a blessing to the world. We are here to glorify Christ in our daily life. We are here as workers for Him ... 'as God's fellow workers.' Let's see that our life answers its end. Let's live earnest, holy lives" – and, I would add, joy-filled, grace-filled, faith-filled lives of love – "to the praise of His glorious grace." (Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, June 10 Morning)

Yes! That is why we are here. So, let's be what God has called us to be, and do what God has called us to do, to glorify His name in all the earth – starting right here.

Can I get an "Amen!" for Brother Spurgeon?

Now, let's look at God's Word in Matthew 3:13-17. This is Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus at the beginning of His public ministry. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

THE FATHER WOUND

Today's message is mostly a story – *my* story – about a wound I've carried around with me for most of my life. It is called *the father wound*. I've never talked about it in a sermon before, probably because I never had the courage, but in the last year or so, God has healed me of this wound in a remarkable way and to a remarkable extent. It is really a miracle, and I want to give God all the credit, all the applause, all the praise and glory for this work of healing He has done, and continues to do, in my life.

I should tell you, though, that even though it is completely out of character for me to get emotional (haha) – I mean, in all the years I've stood in this pulpit, you have never seen my emotions spill over, right? (haha) – it is just possible that I may get a little choked up today, maybe a lot choked up, because my emotions are still tender in this area, and I'm still grieving the loss of something I never had. If that doesn't make sense right now, I hope it will by the time I'm done. So, bear with me, and by God's grace I'll get through it.

I could begin this story at any number of places, but perhaps this is as good as any: During his freshman year at JMU, at the urging of one of his IV small group leaders, my son Nate started reading the book *Wild at Heart* by John Eldredge. Not the John Eldredge who worships with us here at Faith regularly, but a different one. The other John Eldredge has written several books, of which *Wild at Heart* is the best known. Written to men and for men, it is about recovering what Eldredge believes is God's design for the masculine heart.

Lots of Christian men are drawn to Eldredge, for good reasons. But he has some critics, too. I had heard of Eldredge and *Wild at Heart* for a number of years, but I had never read the book. That is, until my son told me he was reading it. I figured if he was reading it, I should read it, too. We decided to read it together, so we could talk about it, whether by e-mail or in person.

I began reading and came to Chapter Four, where Eldredge writes: "Every boy, in his journey to become a man, takes an arrow in the center of his heart.... Because the wound is rarely discussed and even more rarely healed, every man carries a wound. And the wound is nearly always given by his father" (p. 60). I had two thoughts when I read that. The first was: *Yes, he's right ... at least about me. It's true in my life. I've got a wound in my heart that goes back about as far as I can remember, back to my boyhood days at Smiths Corners, PA. And he's right, the wound came from my dad.* That was my first thought. Next came this frightening thought: *O my goodness, what have I done to my son? I wonder if I have wounded him... and how?*

When I told Nate about my reaction and my fear that I have wounded him in some way, he laughed and assured me that he doesn't have a father wound. I wonder, though, if he *does* have a father wound, and he just doesn't realize it yet.

I don't know if Eldredge goes too far in his assertion that just about every man has a father wound. Maybe he is using hyperbole to make a point. I do know, though, that it is not just boys, not just men, not just sons, who receive wounds from their fathers. Lots of daughters, lots of girls, lots of women, have been wounded by their dads. Christian counselor H. Norman Wright has written a book entitled *Healing for the Father Wound*, an earlier version of which was called *The Dad-Sized Hole in My Heart*, about the ways daughters are wounded by fathers who are absent, abusive, emotionally-distant, or impossible to please. If sons were the only recipients of the father wound, it would still be a tragedy. But it affects both sons and daughters alike. And marriages and families, into which husband and wife alike bring their wounds. Unhealed wounds.

Let me tell you a bit about my Dad, Roger G. Smith. He has been gone almost 18 years now. He died in 1994 at the age of 74. I was 39 years old at the time of his death. Dad was an only child, born to my grandparents, Dave and Flossie Smith, in 1920. They lived in the same rural community in which we lived when I was growing up. (It was so rural, you can't even call it a village.) Dad was in the second generation of our family to attend Grove City College, from which he graduated in 1942. Erin and Lindsay, our daughters whom Mary Sue and I love, are fourth generation "Grovers." After graduating from college, Dad was commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant in the Navy and served aboard the USS Brooklyn in the Mediterranean Sea during World War II. After the War, he came back home to Pennsylvania, met my Mom on a blind date (she was working at the Pentagon at the time), and they married in 1947. You should have seen them. My Dad was one handsome dude in his Navy uniform, and Mom was a knockout! (Many of you have met my mother. She has been here a number of times. She lives in Grove City, PA, and is in good health for her age, having just turned 85 this past week. Our extended Smith family, some 20 of us, will celebrate her birthday with her next week in Charleston, SC.)

My Dad was fairly successful in his work as an insurance agent. Though we lived pretty modestly, Dad provided well for his family. We never lacked anything we needed. Dad was well-respected in the community, and served on the local school board at one point. The things I remember most about Dad involved Christmas trees and sports, especially baseball. We had a Christmas tree business that my father and grandfather started in 1941. In all, we had nearly 200 acres of pine trees. It was a side business for Dad, but pruning the trees in the summer, and then cutting and selling trees around Christmas, occupied a lot of our time and energy when I was growing up. A whole lot.

The other thing I remember most about Dad was his love of sports, with baseball as the undisputed #1. Dad was an outstanding baseball player in his day, a left-handed hitter and left-handed throwing first baseman. I owe my boyhood devotion to baseball to him. We had a field in our backyard, where we would play – constantly – with the neighborhood boys. Dad would often play ball with us, on weekends or after dinner on summer evenings, either pitching to us or giving us fielding practice. We were *big* Pittsburgh Pirates fans, listening to broadcasts of Pirate games all spring and summer long on our transistor radios. Once or twice every summer, Dad would take us to Forbes Field in Pittsburgh to see the Pirates play. It was about a two-hour drive each way. There is no question that Dad had a lot to do with my love affair with baseball and my boyhood "addiction" to baseball statistics.

Dad, I'm sorry to say, didn't attend church with us regularly when I was growing up. He would come once in a while, but not often. My mother was the de facto spiritual leader in our home. I can't say that I ever saw much, if any, evidence in Dad's life of a personal trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of his life. I hope he did trust in Christ. I hope he is in heaven now. I just don't know.

The last ten years or so of his life were not easy, as Dad dealt with depression and then an Alzheimer's-like dementia that got progressively worse until his death in 1994.

I know my Dad loved me. There is no doubt in my mind about it. Perhaps he loved me and my brothers and sister the best he knew how. I don't want to be disrespectful toward my Dad in any way, because I loved him, too. I love him – his memory – today. But I was wounded by my father when I was a boy. I carried that wound with me into adulthood. I carried it into my marriage. I carried it into parenthood. I brought it with me when I became a pastor. And it came with me when I became your pastor.

You see, though my Dad was present in our home when I was growing up, he wasn't *really* present. It was pretty evident that my Dad's priorities were 1) making money (in addition to his insurance business and our Christmas tree business on the side, it seemed like he was constantly checking the stock market and monitoring his investments, but I don't recall that he ever tried to teach me or my siblings anything about investing); and 2) sports (if it wasn't baseball, it was football or basketball). When he was home in the evening, he was either engrossed in his work, the stock reports, or TV. Dad was just not emotionally engaged with our family. He was mostly silent. Uninvolved. Detached. He was never abusive, either verbally or physically. Never. But as I grew from a boy into a man, I really didn't know how to become a man. I never learned from my Dad how to *be* a man. I never knew, except for fleeting moments, if I was ever good enough in his eyes. I grew up without knowing if I was really, deeply, loved by my Dad, just as I was. I grew up without knowing, to borrow a word from Eldredge, that I was *prized* by my Dad, or that I held a special place in his heart that had nothing to do with getting straight A's in school or winning the spelling bee, or how good I was at baseball or basketball (not very), but just because I was his son, and he was my Dad.

This wound – from my father – cut deep into my heart. And I carried it for a long time. Maybe you've got a father wound, too. They come in lots of varieties, and they affect both sons and daughters. Maybe there is a "dad-sized hole in your heart" that your earthly father never filled. Maybe you're a dad, and you realize you have wounded your kids in some way. Or, like me, maybe you have one of those "uh-oh" moments where you wonder if you have done something (or failed to do something) that has left a scar on the heart of one of your kids. Or all of them.

The father wound is real. But there is healing from it. The father wound *can* be healed. I had a profound experience of healing in my life last September. It was September 1, 2011. It was a Thursday. And it happened right here in this Sanctuary. I was sitting right there in the front row. A woman named Patty who is devoted to the ministry of prayer (she is one of Maureen Orsini's sisters) had asked if she could pray for me. She knew about some of my health issues, and the chronic daily headache that is my constant companion.

Another of Maureen's sisters, Colleen, a prayer warrior as well, came with Patty to pray over me. It was around noon when we met. We talked for a bit, and then they began to pray. They prayed, and prayed, and prayed some more. And the Lord did an amazing thing in me. I was not healed physically that day. The constant headaches, the chronic stiffness in my neck, and all the other reminders of my mortality, are still with me. The Lord has not yet taken any of them away. I'm still completely deaf in my left ear. But the Lord did heal me that day. He healed my father wound. Blessed be His name!

During this prolonged period when they were praying over me, both Colleen and Patty spoke to me of the love of the Heavenly Father for *me*. They spoke directly to me and told me that the Father *loves* me, and *treasures* me, and *takes delight* in me – not because of what I do, not because of anything I have ever done or may ever do, but simply because I am His. Simply because I am His child. *Loved. Treasured. Cherished. Prized.* Exactly what I longed to hear, to know, to feel, to receive from my earthly father, but never did. I heard it that day as I had never heard it before. I felt it that day deep in my soul. I received it that day from my Heavenly Father. It was balm to my soul. If Colleen and Patty knew about my father wound and my need to be healed from it, the Lord Himself must have told them. Because I didn't. And very few people in my life knew about it. But that day, in words nearly identical to the words spoken by the Father at the baptism of Jesus, I heard my Heavenly Father say: "Neil, you are my son, my beloved son, and I will never stop loving you. I am so pleased with you. I take delight in you. You give me such joy. You are a treasure of my grace."

You cannot imagine how this has affected my life. Or maybe you can. If it changed my life, it can change yours, too. Because what the Father said to me in this holy place that Thursday afternoon last September is just as true for you.

Listen: At the baptism of Jesus, when God the Father spoke to His Son in an audible voice, it was not because Jesus had suffered some kind of father wound from which He needed to be healed. No way. For Jesus the voice from heaven was a confirmation of what He already knew concerning His identity and mission. To those who also heard it, it was a signal that Jesus was (and is) indeed God's own Son, "chosen and marked by (His) love, delight of (His) life" (Matthew 3:17, *The Message*). Later on, in the transfiguration of Jesus, when Peter, James, and John were given a glimpse of His true glory, and Peter started babbling on about staying there and building shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, the same voice – the voice of the Father – spoke again with the same message: "This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to Him!" (Matthew 17:5; cf. Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). The voice was not for Jesus. It was for the disciples. It was for their sake. And ours.

Never lose sight of who Jesus is and what He did for us. What He did for you. What He did for a world full of sinners helpless to do anything – *anything* – to make ourselves acceptable to God.

And never, ever lose sight of the fact that you have a Heavenly Father who has made you His own beloved child through the suffering and death of His Son Jesus Christ. You have a Heavenly Father who invites you to call Him *Abba*, which means "Daddy" or "Papa." You

have a Heavenly Father who has not only brought you into His family, He has promised to give you the kingdom as your inheritance.

Your earthly father may have let you down. Or worse. Your earthly father may have wounded you deeply. You may have spent your whole life trying to overcome it, or to compensate for it. You may have spent your whole life trying to prove you deserve your father's love. But no one should have to do that.

And you don't have to prove you deserve the love of your Heavenly Father. All you need to do is believe it. All you need to do is accept it. All you need to do is receive it. All you need to do, if you've never done it, is to receive by faith the gift of His saving love in the person and work of Jesus. All you need to do is to believe God when He says: "*You* are my son. *You* are my daughter. *You* are my beloved child. *You* are precious to me, just the way you are. I love you. I cherish you. I take delight in you. And I always will. Not because of who you are or what you do, but because you are mine."

Fathers (and mothers, too), let's implore our Heavenly Father to help us love our children and our children's children with this same kind of love.

Dads, if you wounded your kids in some way, ask their forgiveness. Let the healing begin.

Sons and daughters, let God heal the father wound in your life. Receive the love of your Heavenly Father in all its healing power.

If you were wounded by your father in some way, ask God for the grace to forgive him. Even if he is no longer living, you can still forgive.

Brothers and sisters, in your life, in your relationships, in your family, let God do whatever He desires, knowing that you are all chosen and marked by His love.

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. Lord, let it be so. Amen.