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# GOD'S FATHERLY LOVE

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**Edward Zwick's 2006 film *Blood Diamond* presents the story of the reunion of a father and his child.**

The story is gruesome: Set in Sierra Leone in 1999, the movie begins with rebel factions terrorizing the countryside, intimidating locals and enslaving some to mine diamonds. One such unfortunate local is a young fisherman, Solomon Vandy.

Solomon escapes the mining camp only to find that his son, Dia, has been captured by revolutionary forces and is now being forced to serve as a child soldier. Solomon's heart is wrecked. He had been a good father his entire life: raising his family in love, coaching his son in soccer, and participating in the life of the African Mendy tribe. He loves his son more than anything, and he knows how much Dia must be suffering.

The life of a child soldier is horrific. Desperate from poverty, traumatized by war and crazed for diamonds, many child soldiers turn to drugs, alcohol, and sexual debauchery to numb the pain. Dia is no different. He needs an escape, and pleasure brings a welcome distraction. Dia's life has become a mixture of depressing work and passing pleasure, very different from the life he knew with his father as a young boy. At first, Dia hoped his father would come. But soon, as the days turn to weeks, Dia's apathy increases and he lets his trust in his father slip away. Eventually Dia becomes seriously depressed and even resents Solomon for failing to rescue him from his misery.

One day, everything changes. Bullets break the morning calm of the rebel encampment. A rival force has come to save the day, and among them is Dia's father, Solomon. Finally, father and son will be reunited — but just as things seem to come to a resolution, a new crisis ensues.

Solomon runs to Dia and tries to embrace him, but much to Solomon's surprise, Dia refuses to acknowledge his father. Brainwashed by the rebel army, Dia thinks to himself, "I can barely

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remember the life I knew with my family, and I have done so many bad things. How could I ever return?"

Solomon comes closer, but Dia will not relent. Scared that he might lose his pleasure, money, and power, Dia grabs a nearby gun and points it directly at his father.

But Solomon is not afraid. Instead, returning his son's gaze, he says, "Dia! What are you doing? Dia, look at me!"

Now, peering over the sight of his gun, Dia feels a lump in his throat as his father's dark eyes look directly into his soul. These are the same eyes that looked at Dia as a baby. The same eyes that watched Dia play soccer. The same eyes that shone with laughter at family dinners with Dia. These were the eyes of Dia's father, a loving father, a father who yearned for Dia to come to his senses. But Dia could not do it, and though tears streamed down his face, he continued to squeeze the trigger.

Dia's father remains firm. He walks towards Dia with tears in his eyes, reminding Dia of his identity, his home, where he came from: "You are Dia Vandy of the proud Mendy tribe. You are a good boy who loves soccer and school."

Dia's hands begin to sweat; his chest quivers and tears run down his cheeks.

His father continues, "*Dia, I know they made you do bad things, but you are not a bad boy. I am your father, who loves you, and you will come home with me and be my son again.*"

At this, Dia breaks. Lowering his gun, he allows himself, in his heart, to return to the identity he'd once known. He allows himself, once again, to trust his father, and his father comes and embraces him.[1]

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**DISCUSS**

*Why was it difficult for Dia to accept the love of his father? What do you think allowed Dia to return to his father?*

## A NEW LOOK AT THE PRODIGAL SON

The movie *Blood Diamond* won awards at multiple film festivals, and Djimon Hounsou (Solomon Vandy) was nominated for an Oscar. His portrayal of a good father inspired the hearts of millions of viewers. One reason for the movie's success is that it speaks to a universal human desire: the desire for love, for acceptance, for healing, and for true fatherhood. But more than anything else, and particularly in this scene, the movie is about *identity*. The movie is about a son who remembers his own identity and that of his father's. At the turning point, when Dia lowers the gun, it's almost as if he thinks to himself, "Oh yes, I remember you: my father, the man I knew before the war. And I remember who I am: your son."

Man's search for identity lies at the core of the human experience. Solomon reminded Dia of his identity as a son and tribe member, but many of us in this present world do not have anyone to tell us our identity. We walk through life with questions, but no answers. We don't know who we are, and we don't know who God is. But we want to know, and it is these two questions which, in the end, motivate all other religious questions: God, who are you? And who am I?

There are a variety of competing offers to address these questions. One answer is *atheism*, the belief that there is no God and you ultimately have no significant identity save perhaps the identity of a random speck in an insignificant universe. Another answer is *deism*, the idea that there is a God, but he is not involved in your daily life. Yet another answer is that God is an all-powerful slave-

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driver or a disconnected judge. None of these false views is the God of Christianity. The Christian view of God is different from all other religions in the world. It not only gives us an answer to our two questions — *Who is God?* and *Who am I?* — but it also tells us something about why we are so enraptured by stories like Solomon and Dia.

How so? Well, the Bible contains a story much like Dia's story. Of the many parables Jesus told, the most famous is called the Parable of the Prodigal Son from the Gospel of Luke. Why is this one the most beloved? You may have heard this parable before, but before you write it off as cliché, ask yourself: Why has this parable inspired the hearts and minds of billions of people? Let's take a look:

> And [Jesus] said, "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How

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> many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" (Lk 15:11–19)

**DISCUSS**

***Why do you think the son left his father, and why does he think about coming back? How do you think the son views himself in this moment?***

## TRUST

The experience of the prodigal son is so typical of almost any human story. Let's review the basic narrative thus far: The prodigal son sinned against his father, felt ashamed and then felt unworthy of the father's love. In short, the prodigal son's actions caused him to doubt his father's love. This tendency to doubt fatherly love, especially God's love, is a typical part of the human experience.

The prodigal son thinks of his father more like a master and himself as a slave. He doesn't feel like he can have a relationship with his father. He's failed miserably, and he knows it. His choices have consequences. He starts thinking back to his father, but he assumes things can never be the same. He's ruined it. He'll just have to be a slave, a cog in the wheel of his father's unforgiving universe. He sees his actions as his identity — thinking, for example, "I'm not good enough. In fact, I am worthless, and I don't deserve real love."

The story of the prodigal son has universal appeal because it highlights a universal cycle: temptation, then sin, then shame, then isolation. Paradoxically, before the cycle begins, people often think

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sin is not a big deal. Yet, after the cycle ends, people think their sin is such a big deal that they have no route back to God!

**DISCUSS**

***Can you relate to the story of the prodigal son? Have you ever lost trust in God, or have you ever felt like you couldn't go back to God? Have you ever experienced this reality on a human level with someone else in your life?***

## COMING HOME

Most of us can relate to the prodigal son, so let's see how the story ends:

> "And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'" (Lk 15:20–24)

*While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion.*
*— Luke 15:20*

Contrary to what the prodigal son expected, his father refuses to treat him as a slave. In fact, the father celebrates his return. His father has been watching from a distance, eagerly awaiting his son's homecoming. The fact that his son has even started his return journey is enough to send the father running to meet him. The son begins explaining his actions, but for the father, the mere fact that the son is interested in coming home is enough to throw a party! The robe and the ring reveal that the son is fully restored. The son

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comes back feeling like a slave, but the father insists that he live as his son.

You might ask, what does all this have to do with our original two questions: *God, who are you? And who am I?* The Parable of the Prodigal Son gives us Christianity's answer. Who is God? He is an all-loving father *(Catechism of the Catholic Church* 238–40).[2] Who are you? You are his child. Scripture is clear that the Lord of the universe, the infinite God and the only being capable of satisfying our desires, is a good father. Christianity is utterly unique among world religions in this radical claim: God is a good Father. He is not a slave driver. He is not out to get you. Nothing you have done can separate you from his love. Your identity has nothing to do with anything that you've done. Indeed, God thirsts for you. Just like Solomon Vandy and the prodigal son's father, he longs for you, and you have infinite value in his eyes.

In the end, Christianity gives a clear answer to who you are: God is father, and your identity lies in the fact that you are God's son or daughter! That is who you are!

Having trouble believing this? Perhaps, like Dia, the wars of your own life have you pointing a gun at God. Or perhaps, like the prodigal son, you think something you've done means you can't go back to God. But nothing could be further from the truth. Like Dia, allow God to remind you of your identity. Like the prodigal son, take the first step back home. Return, lower the gun, allow God the chance to show you his love. Allow yourself to once again — or perhaps for the first time — begin a relationship with him.

## DISCUSS

***How do you think God sees you right now? What do you think about when you consider coming closer (or returning) to God? Do you believe that God is your loving Father?***

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[1] *Blood Diamond,* directed by Edward Zwick (2006; California: Warner Bros, 2007), DVD.

[2] "By calling God 'Father,' the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children." (CCC 239)