

“FATHER’S DAY”

Readings: Psalm 103:6-14

Matthew 1:18-25

SINCE I PREACHED a sermon last month about Mother’s Day, I suppose turnabout is fair play. So for all you dads out there, this one’s for you.

Our primary text for this morning comes from Saint Matthew’s Gospel, specifically chapter one, which we usually associate with the Christmas season. In it, Joseph, the father of Jesus makes a fleeting appearance. He does as the angel instructs him—taking Mary as his wife and having no “relations” with her until after she had borne a son whom they named Jesus. Then, other than a brief mention in chapter two, Joseph disappears from the biblical narrative for good.

There are theological reasons for his quick exit of course. The Gospel writers were anxious to move him out of the picture because they wanted to underscore the point that his real father is God (it would be hard to call him the Son of God, if in fact, his father was really Joseph). Theology aside however, it all seems perfectly fitting, because when it comes to child rearing we fathers have long been used to playing second fiddle.

In many ways Father’s Day is like the Rodney Dangerfield of holidays—it just doesn’t get any respect. Despite the fact that it has now been around for one hundred years, Father’s Day always seems to take a backseat to Mother’s Day, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving and any number of national holidays.

The first observance of Father’s Day is believed to have been held on June 19, 1910 through the efforts of Sonora Smart Dodd of Spokane, Washington. After listening to a sermon at Spokane’s Central Methodist Episcopal Church about Mother’s Day, Dodd felt strongly that father’s Day needed to be recognized as well. She wanted a celebration that honored fathers like her own father, William

Smart, a Civil War veteran who was left to raise his family alone when his wife died giving birth to their sixth child when Sonora was sixteen years old.

The following year, with the assistance of her pastor, Sonora took the idea to the Spokane YMCA. The Spokane YMCA, along with the Ministerial Alliance, endorsed Dodd's idea and helped spread it by celebrating the first father's Day in 1910. Sonora suggested that her father's birthday, June 5, be established as the day to honor all Father's. However, the clergy wanted more time to prepare, so on June 19, 1910, young members of the YMCA went to church wearing roses: a red rose to honor a living father, and a white rose to honor a deceased one.

It took a long time before the holiday became official. In spite of support from YMCA, the YWCA, and the churches, Father's Day ran the risk of disappearing from the calendar. Where Mother's Day was met with enthusiasm, Father's Day was often met with laughter. The holiday was gathering attention, but for all the wrong reasons. It was the target of much satire, parody, and derision, including jokes in the local newspapers. Many people saw it as the first step in filling the calendar with mindless promotions.

A bill that would give national recognition to the day was introduced in Congress in 1913. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson wanted to make it an official holiday, but Congress resisted, fearing it would become commercialized (which it has). In 1924, President Calvin Coolidge recommended that the day be observed by the nation, but stopped short of issuing a national proclamation. In 1957, Maine Senator Margret Chase Smith wrote a proposal accusing Congress of ignoring fathers for forty years while honoring mothers, thus "singling out just one of our two parents." In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson issued the first presidential proclamation honoring fathers, designating the third Sunday in June as Father's Day. Six years later, the day was made a permanent national holiday when Richard Nixon of all people, signed it into law in 1972.

In many ways the bumpy history of Father's Day mirrors the ambiguity of the role itself. For a long time it was the responsibility of Fathers to sire children, turn them over to their mothers, and then get out of the way. Fortunately, times have changed, but it doesn't necessarily mean the role of fatherhood is any more

clearly defined. While it's true that the role of women has undergone an enormous change during our lifetime, so too, has the role of fathers, although you rarely hear as much about it.

It's never been easy to be a father, but these days I suspect it's more difficult than ever. Fathers used to know who they were and what their role was. These days however, that is no longer the case. Historically, I can think of four distinct roles fathers were expected to play that today are no longer applicable or desirable.

The first role was that of dad the clown. Fathers were expected to provide comic relief and serve as never ending source of family amusement. Lovable, bumbling, old dad, hitting his thumb with a hammer; forgetting the date of his wedding anniversary; trying to put the toys together at Christmas without using directions. I'm all for humor but not at the expense of someone's dignity. Everyone enjoys a good laugh, and there's plenty to laugh about in life, but not at the expense of our fathers. We can't expect fathers to take their roles seriously if the rest of the family regards them as buffoons.

A second role fathers have traditionally been saddled with is that of disciplinarian. I'm almost sixty years old but I can still hear the words, "Wait until your father gets home!" ringing in my ears. Thinking back on it, how I pity my poor mother, home alone all day with us boys. On the other hand, how I pity my poor father, working all day only to come home and be told he had to handle the dirty work of disciplining us! Thankfully, much of that changed during the age of co-parenting, as well it should. No parent—mother or father-- should be stuck with the role of family enforcer.

A third role, now no longer the sole province of fathers, is that of breadwinner. Back in the day that's what fathers did—brought home the bacon. Today, however, wives (or partners) often earn salaries equal to or greater than that of their husband's. I suppose that takes some of the pressure off the fathers, although it probably just transfers it on to the mothers.

Even in family life however, Newton's laws of physics remain in effect—for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. While fathers may welcome the assistance of a partner in the breadwinning department it has also stripped them of what used to be one of their primary functions. As the traditional duties of fathers are shared or usurped by others many fathers are left wondering just exactly what their role is.

All of which leads us to the last and most spiritually damaging of all the roles our fathers have traditionally modeled, namely, dad as distant or disengaged. This of course has been a huge problem in the African American community, but it is by no means a problem that is confined to that community alone. If Father's are no longer expected to be disciplinarians, breadwinners, or clowns, then what are they supposed to be?

My own idolized model of what a father should be is probably Gregory Peck, in the movie, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. As Atticus Finch, a small town lawyer back in the days of segregation, Peck is left to raise his two children, Scout and Jim, after his wife has died. As a father he is at once both firm and nurturing; somehow managing to strike the perfect balance between work and family life. He maintains his children's love and respect not because he demands it but because he elicits it. Who can ever forget the powerful scene where a drunken racist confronts him for agreeing to defend an African American man accused of raping a white woman? As his terrified children look on, the man walks up to Finch and spits in his face. There is a long pause as Finch slowly removes a handkerchief from his suit pocket, wipes his face, and puts the handkerchief away. By not retaliating it is apparent to Jim and Scout that their father is a man of integrity who stands morally head and shoulders above his assailant.

Father's are called to be helpmates to their wives and examples to their children. It is not enough for fathers to act as friends or playmates, although being a friend and being playful are part of what it means to be a father. Like mothers, fathers are called to play a multiplicity of roles—teacher, confidant, cheer leader, provider and guardian. Fathers don't have to be perfect, but they do have to show that they are interested and that they care.

Perhaps there is no more visible sign of the changing role of fathers in our society than to walk into a men's room and find a diaper changing station. Gone are the days when we expect mothers to handle that duty by themselves. Gone too, are the days when it would be considered outrageous for a father to request paternity leave. Indeed, in Sweden, fully 85 percent of Swedish fathers now take paternity leave, usually for a period of about two months.

The old stereotyping of fathers as non-nurturing is now being called into question. We fathers have been led to believe that we are incapable of nurturing our children the same way our daughters have been led to believe that they will never be any good at math. In an article that appeared in last week's *New York Times*, Dr. Julia Fisher who studies the behavior of male Barbary Macaques, found that the fathers attend to the young with an avidity and particularity long thought to be the domain of the mother. Said Fisher, "It doesn't matter if the infant is their own or not. Just so long as it has the downy black fur and wrinkly pinkish face that adult male Macaques find impossible to resist."

In other words, dads, we can't blame our poor nurturing skills on nature alone. Biologically speaking we have it in us. To paraphrase Shakespeare, "The fault dear fathers, lies not in our genetic makeup, but in our lives."

I realize that father's Day may not bring back a lot of happy memories for all of us, especially if we didn't get everything from our own fathers that we think we needed. To that I would only say it's not an easy job and there are no perfect fathers for the simple reason that there are no perfect people. But no matter how we may feel about how our own fathers treated us it's no excuse not to try and be the best father we can possibly be ourselves. Let's not vanish from the scene the same way Joseph did. Let's look at fatherhood not only as a responsibility, but also as an opportunity—an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of the people who should matter to us the most—our children.

I said earlier that I'm all for humor and to prove it I would like to close with the following words from the poet, Ogden Nash:

Being a father
Is quite a bother.
You are as free as the air
With time to spare.
You're a fiscal rocket
With change in your pocket.
And then one morn
A child is born.
Your life has been runcible,
Irresponsible.
Like an arrow or javelin
You've been constantly travelin.'
But mostly, I daresay,
Without a chaise percee.
To which by comparison
Nothing's embarison.
But all children matures,
Maybe even yours.
You improve them mentally
And straighten them dentally,
They grow tall as a lancer
And ask questions you can't answer,

And supply you with data
About how everybody wears lipstick sooner and
stays up later,
And if they are popular,
The phone they monopolize.
They scorn the dominion
Of their parent's opinion,
They're no longer corrigible
Once they find that you're fallible
But after you've raised them and educated them
and gowned them,
They just take their little fingers
And wrap you around them.
Being a father is quite a bother,
But I like it, rather.

Being a father is both a bother and a challenge, but it is also gift. Today,
let's celebrate the gift of fatherhood by giving thanks for our fathers and all they
have done for us!

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June 20, 2010

