

Father Love

Father's Day, no less than Mother's Day, is a particular challenge for preachers and congregations. These holidays have no religious basis, unless you are willing to count the fifth of the Ten Commandments, the one that enjoins us to honor our mothers and fathers. Somehow I don't think that God (or Moses) really had in mind sending cards, choosing gifts, standing in line for restaurants, and clogging the telephone lines all over America. And yet, for many families (including mine), these two holidays are the equivalent of what our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters call "Holy Days of Obligation."

There is no way to honor that obligation for everyone who is here today, because our experiences and our feelings about our fathers range widely. Today we celebrate fathers who have been conscientious and lucky in their parenting, we lament those who were neither conscientious nor lucky, and we grieve for the loss of fathers who are no longer with us. Some of us had fathers we honor and respect without reservation; some of us have fathers who were harsh or even abusive. Most of us have fathers somewhere in between: dads who we sometimes got along with, sometimes battled, sometimes appreciated, and sometimes feared or pitied. So most years, I do not celebrate Father's Day at all in the church, except possibly with mention in the pastoral prayer.

Of course in some ways, in the majority of Christian churches around the world, and for the majority of Christian churches in history, every Sunday is Father's Day. That is, for most Christians, "Father" is the most common way in which God is named, imagined, and worshipped. The "Heavenly Father" is invoked in prayer, liturgy, and song, and the Trinitarian formula is nearly always pronounced as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." That practice has its roots in the New Testament, where Jesus often refers to God as his Father. In this congregation (and in much of the United Church of Christ) we address God as Father much less than most other Christians; today is a good day to reflect on why that is so.

For a combination of philosophical, cultural, and theological reasons, it became clear perhaps 30 or 35 years ago that the link between our words and images for God (on the one hand) and our understanding of God (on the other) was a two-way street. Prior to that, I think most of us assumed that people experienced the presence of God and then put their experience into words. That is, the experience influenced the choice of words. What we learned was that it goes the other way, too: our words influence the experience. It became clear to many Christians – particularly those awakened by feminist critiques of religion and theology – that our use of exclusively male words and images for God led to both thinking about God in the same categories we think about human men, and to thinking about human men in the same categories we think about

God. This was not intentional in most cases, but that did not make it any less real or any less powerful.

The response to this dilemma was the movement that was first known as “inclusive language,” and later known as “expansive language.” I like the latter term better, because I think it expresses more accurately what we are trying to do: to expand our language to describe God with a greater variety of names, images, and traits. This notion caught hold of a significant number of members of the United Church of Christ, and in the 1980’s the General Synod passed a resolution promising that all of the worship materials produced by the denomination would use a variety of language and images of God.

While not everyone was enthusiastic about this resolution, the real stir began when the church decided to compile a new hymnal. The hymnal committee took the words of the resolution seriously and literally: male words, names, and pronouns were included only if they were specific to the content of the text, and not simply as names of God. This was a painful loss for people whose personal piety had longed used male words, especially “Father” to speak to and about God. Prayers and hymns sounded awkward (and of course, some of them were!), but mostly they just sounded unfamiliar. Much of the uproar over the publication of the New Century Hymnal centered on the changes that had been made in familiar hymns – and the ones we are singing today are examples of that:

- “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind” was changed to “Dear God, Embracing Humankind”
- “Faith of Our Fathers” became “Faith of the Martyrs” (based on a slightly different translation of a Greek word)
- The tune we remember as “This Is My Father’s World” (Terra Beata) has a new text, “God Reigns o’er All the Earth” written by Jane Parker Huber, and
- “God of Our Fathers, Whose Almighty Hand” became “God of the Ages, Who with Sure Command.”

Having identified these hymns, I ask you one favor: please don’t line up today to tell me which hymns you like the changes in and which ones you don’t. I know that some of the poetry was spoiled and some of the theology may have been compromised. Instead, I invite you to reflect on the ways that this editing was successful: it made us keenly aware of how often we relied upon one particular image of God, and how rarely we stretched our imaginations and our voices to seek other images. This is even more evident when we consider the hymns that were new to the New Century Hymnal – the ones that have brought us songs from other nations and traditions, and the ones that have addressed contemporary concerns, like the stewardship of the environment.

One interesting thing about all this was that members of the United Church of Christ already knew that God was not exclusively male, nor white, nor old (as he is pictured in the famous paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel). We knew that no single

human form could describe all of the qualities of God. And still, it was a challenge to bring that conviction into practice in our words and worship.

Not only was it a challenge, it had a cost. We are often myopic – near sighted – about what we give up when we make a new commitment that has caught our hearts and minds. And what we gave up was the chance to use our own experience as children of fathers to understand more about God.

I said earlier that each individual has a different set of experiences and emotions with her/his father. It is even more true that each of us has many different experiences and emotions with our fathers. And it is just this variety, inconsistency, and muddle that can teach us about God.

If we are honest about it, even the most faithful and pious among us has had some rough moments with God. In times of grief, for example, we express our lament by railing at God about God's failure to save the person we love or influence the outcome we were hoping for. We are confused by God; we are grateful to God; we are angry at God. We feel close to God, and we feel far from God.

In all of this, we honor God. In all of our flailing around, our uncertainties and inconsistencies, we are celebrating God's active spirit and speaking voice. To repeat, it is our experiences with earthly fathers – and father-figures of all kinds – that illuminate for us the honesty and complexity of our connections with the creator of the universe, the savior of the world, the Advocate and comforter of all the faithful.

Compared to all of this, our celebration of the secular Father's Day is pretty tame and more grounded in stereotypes than in fact. I remember looking for a greeting card in the last years of my father's life, when Parkinson's disease and dementia had limited his activities and shrunken his world. Most of the cards I found were either about sports (fishing and hunting were predominant) or about dads' humorous failings; neither fit our situation very well. I needed a card that spoke of our ongoing relationship, of my love and respect for him that was not lost or spoiled by his mental and physical decline. I needed a card that was honest about who my dad was, and about who I was. I had to buy a blank card and find my own words to do that.

Jesus found his own words, too, and he did not use the word of formal address. He used the familiar form in Aramaic, "Abba," which is translated as "Papa" or "Daddy." Maybe that fact will transform our prayer today: "Our papa, who art in heaven ..." "Our daddy ..." Maybe that fact will invite us to call God "Father," thoughtfully, gently, just once in a while.

Amen.

Prayer for June 17, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

Holy One, we pray this morning for all the people who have been fathers to us, both men and women – those who sired us, those who raised us, those who loved, challenged, and corrected us.

We are grateful to you, our divine parent, for all of the people who have stepped into our lives to bring your love to us in human form. We thank you for the faith and fortitude they have shown, for the sacrifices and compromises they have made on our behalf, and for lessons they have taught us. Bless each of these, and fill them with the knowledge of the ways that they have contributed to our lives.

We acknowledge with special compassion those people whose care for us was limited by their own shortcomings and by the events and complications of their own lives. Bless them for their loving intentions, and give us loving hearts to receive their gifts gratefully, even as we also acknowledge our disappointment or loss.

We thank you, too, Gracious God, for the opportunity to offer nurture, encouragement, and mentoring to others. Help us all – men and women, old and young – to demonstrate the best of what fathering is: love, discipline, hope, and health. Forgive us when we fall short of these ideals, and give us persistence and patience to continue these relationships.

In a world where men's work is often disrespected, underpaid, unrecognized, and devalued, we ask your particular blessing on the men who serve you and others faithfully, and on the women who respect, reward, recognize, and value them.

All these things we pray in the name of the one who honored his own father and invited men into the ministry of the church, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...

First offered (with other pronouns!) on Mother's Day, May 13, 2007