



C. Kutz-Marks, preaching

Loving Dad, Loving God

Pentecost 4, a, June 15, 2008

Fathers' Day

Matthew 10:34-39

This Fathers' Day, I hope that each of us are thinking back to the important relationships we have had with the Father Figures of our lives. These may have been our actual, biological fathers. They may have been other men or women, who, thank God, came to us when our own father's were absent..... for whatever reason.

My own father's father was both absentee and not the most wholesome model. I was given his name, a name that he only rarely used, Henry Charles Marks. Everyone at his pool hall knew him simply as Geechi. We called him the same. As a younger man living in our home town and playing on the town's baseball team, he was known as "Crazy Legs" Marks because he had an odd gait. But Geechi's claim to fame was that at the end of Prohibition, he obtained the first retail liquor license in the State of Georgia for his pool hall in Albany, the Rialto. Geechi was good enough as a pool shark to make a living playing the game. That's good, because it covered his inept business practices. He was often taken advantage of in business. His wife, my grandmother, used to say that she could have wall-papered their living room with all the bad checks he took from his customers.

Geechi's only son, my father, grew up with the African American handy man of the family as his surrogate Dad. Geechi was always at the pool hall or the ball field or playing cards with his buddies, so the family's handy man, J.D., as he was known, taught my Dad how to sharpen a knife, to use tools to fix up things. J.D. taught Dad how to drive, to hunt, to fish, and talked with him about how to negotiate the trials of teenage

years. I remember decades later when J.D. died that my father was at least as emotionally bereft as when Geechi passed away.

When I went home a couple weeks ago, I found my Dad so far advanced in his dementia that he couldn't recognize those of us of his family, except rarely when speechlessly you could see on his face that perhaps some brief recognition flashed across his awareness. One of the highlights of the trip was as I showed Dad some photos and named the people in them, when I said "Geechi", that one time he repeated after me his Dad's name.

Like his dad, my Dad was absentee, too, for the most part, but for a totally different set of reasons. My dad was a workaholic, so dedicated to his practice of medicine that I might not see him for a week at a time, even though he slept at home each night. He left so early for the hospital and came back so late at night, that around the house there was no evidence of him.

Dad is so well loved in the community for all the good care he provided others that I could easily honor my father – as the 10 commandments require, but it was hard to even get to know him. Fathers of my friends and Youth leaders of my church often served as my father figures, who gave me the guidance I needed at critical times. Years later Dad began to deeply regret some of the decisions that he had made about time spent at work rather than spent at home with his family.

So it seems that my family's tradition of fathering is not that good... and according to stories I hear from others, that's typical of many families.

My relationship with Dad during my teen years was remote, indeed. Today's scripture lesson was one that comforted me in college, when my actions nearly pushed that tenuous relationship with Dad over the edge forever. In college I had become a fundamentalist Christian and returned our home one Christmas break with the specific intent of converting my Jewish father to the form of Christian truth as I then knew it.

These words were in my mind,

Matt. 10:37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;

I understood that to mean that I was to witness my Christian faith and I was to use every effort I could muster to convince Dad- and all others- of the supremacy of Christ.

I was direct and relentless. I obviously insulted Dad's own Jewish beliefs in a way that I now greatly regret, but at that time, I truly thought I was being a good, faithful Christian. That episode very nearly ruptured our relationship. It cast a cloud over any contact between us for nearly seven years.

Thank God that in the years since, as my relationship with Dad not only healed, but become more important to me than ever before.

I share this with you this morning because,

I do not believe it mere coincidence, that as my relationship with my father became stronger and more loving, my relationship with God grew stronger, and more loving, as well.

You see, whether we like it or not **very often our relationship with our fathers is an image of our relationship with God. Our loving of our dads, reflects our Loving of God.**

Now, it may not be a good image. It may, in fact, be an extremely painful image, but how we see our fathers is still often some kind of reflection of how we relate to God.

“Wait just a minute,” I can imagine some of you thinking,

“Isn't this just as true of our mothers as well?”

“Yes, mostly.”

“And isn't all the God as Father talk, simply a reflection of the culture in which Jesus taught this connection... in which the earliest Christian church grew and developed?”

“Yes,” I would answer, “but it is still powerful, nonetheless.”

Listen to the language that we use about God. For better or worse, it is filled with “He's” that color our understandings and promote an unconscious connection between our fathers and God. As an example, listen to the meanings and to the wording of this Essay from an 8-year old about God. It was written by by Danny Dutton, age 8, from Chula Vista, California, for his third grade homework assignment titled "Explain God":

“One of God's main jobs is making people. He makes them to replace the ones that die so there will be enough people to take care of things on earth. He doesn't make grown-ups, just babies, I think because they are smaller and easier to make. That way,

He doesn't have to take up His valuable time teaching them to talk and walk. He can just leave that to mothers and fathers.

God's second most important job is listening to prayers. An awful lot of this goes on, since some people, like preachers, pray at times besides bedtime. God doesn't have time to listen to the radio or TV because of this. Because He hears everything, there must be a terrible lot of noise in His ears, unless He has thought of a way to turn it off.

God sees everything and hears everything and is everywhere which keeps Him pretty busy. So you shouldn't go wasting His time by going over your mom's and dad's head asking for something they said you couldn't have.¹

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Did you hear how very much little Danny's talk about God made God seem like another human being... just more powerful. As we grow older, our thinking matures and we understand it would be ridiculous to ascribe to God a masculine gender. But our language all too often takes the easy way out and repeats the easy "hes" and "his," that every so subtly tie our thinking about God more to men than the women..

Ask most 8 yr. olds if God is a he or a she and you'll be surprised to find how many cannot yet imagine God as she. Anthropologists tell us that our language doesn't just express our thinking, it shapes our thinking. How we speak about any issue colors our understanding of it. How we speak about God, colors our understanding of God.

So for the time being, recognize that the men who populate our world and our consciousness hold quite a bit of power in influencing our thinking about the nature of God. Bad fathering leads to images of God that are **mean, judging, vindictive**. Good fathering leads to understandings of God that are **both strong and loving**. For example, consider how all the people of New York might be challenged in their understanding of God after having had a strong and loving mayor like Fiorello LaGuardia.

LaGuardia was mayor of New York City during its rise from the Great Depression and all of World War II. He was called by adoring New Yorkers "the Little Flower" because he was only five foot four and always wore a carnation in his lapel. He was a colorful character who "used to ride the New York City fire trucks, raid speakeasies with the police department, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and

whenever the New York newspapers were on strike ... he used to go on radio and read the Sunday 'funnies' to the kids."

One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. "She told LaGuardia that her daughter's husband had deserted her, her daughter was sick and her grandchildren were starving. But the shopkeeper, from whom the bread was stolen, refused to drop the charges. 'It's a bad neighborhood, your Honor,' the man told the mayor. 'She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson.'

"LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said 'I've got to punish you ... The law makes no exceptions - \$10 or ten days in jail.'" But even as he pronounced sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous sombrero saying:

"Here's the \$10.00 fine which I now remit; and furthermore I'm going to fine everyone in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant.

"So the following day the New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered old lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren, 50 cents of that amount being contributed by the red-faced grocery store owner, while some 70 petty criminals, people with traffic violations, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents for the privilege of doing so, gave the mayor a standing ovation."ⁱⁱ

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Strong, loving, insightful, challenging. This is Fathering at its best. This Father's Day, let us give thanks to our earthly Fathers and express our Love for them—and also for all the others in our lives, who weren't biological fathers—but who have embodied the strength and the love for us, so that we, in turn, might dedicate ourselves:

to growing that strength and love,
to sharing that strength and love,

to embodying that strength and love, for the next generation of those who will follow after us, and look to us for a model of a strong and loving God.

ⁱ Sent to me as an e-mail from Karrie Haas who found it on the Internet.

ⁱⁱ --James N. McCutcheon, "The Righteous and the Good." Best Sermons 1, ed. James W. Cox (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 238-39.