

Faith of our Fathers

It seems like an easy jump to honor Fathers this day and somehow make the jump to God as our heavenly Father, and to somehow either equate the human role as Father to the God role or contrast just how far we fall short. No matter our experience in our human relationships, we all to turn to our “perfect” Father in heaven.

It almost seems cliché, doesn't it? At first I wanted to resist that orientation. But on further reflection and contemplation, you know what? I think it is a very sound starting point to reflect on some of these very real experiences. Should we do that today?

1. About Dad

My father was born in 1928 in South Baltimore. Joined the Navy at 17 fresh out of high school just as WWII was ending. He played football for Navy. He was a little over 6' 7" and was a running back and defensive tackle...in those days, most players played both ways, rarely coming off the field. His Navy games were played on Saturdays and on Sundays when he had leave; he would play another game for a local semi-pro football team. When the football season was over, he boxed as a heavyweight for Navy. All that to say, he was a pretty tough guy. Married to my mother at 19 (she was 18) they began to raise a family. We had a traditional 1950's and 60's American family with a Dad who worked, a stay-at-home Mom and two children; my sister, five years my senior and me.

2. Lessons and Faith of Dad

My Dad worked hard. That was something he not only knew how to do but demonstrated every day of his life. But he worked hard out of necessity, in order to provide for our family and still hold fast to the style of family he and my mother

wanted to have, namely...with Dad working and Mom staying at home raising the kids. Was that a perfect existence? Hardly. There were years that my Dad worked 100+ hours a week which left little time to be with the family and I remember missing him, but never resenting him being gone. But it was the choice they made, shaped in some measure I'm sure by the cultural and normative expectations of the times in which they lived. But by the time I was 8 or 9, he found time to be an assistant coach for my little league baseball team and assistant coach of my football team. When I began playing basketball, he always showed up for that. He taught me to play tennis and golf and how to box. In my world, those were all the "normal" things a young boy did and so that fit the typical ways Dads and sons connected. But he also coached my sister's softball team and continued to do that up until college for her and continued coaching women's unlimited softball even after her softball career ended. Not many women played competitive sports at that time, but my father was a champion for equal opportunity! I've already said how he was a tough guy but he also had a softness and an openness that seemed unusual to me, even when I was young. I did not observe that in other men I knew. At one point, when I was about 7 or 8, I told my Dad I wanted to take tap and ballet lessons. His gaze looked a little surprise and he turned to my mother...looked back at me and said..."we can do that". And so I did. Later when I sang in choirs and was in plays and musicals, my Dad would be there supporting whatever activity in which I was involved and he did the same for my sister with equal enthusiasm and encouragement. I don't ever remember talking about equality or tolerance or acceptance of other people's choices in lifestyles, but I clearly know how he lived and treated others and those lessons in action are stronger than any words or slogans that he could have said.

I also know how much he cared about people and wanted to help whenever he could even in small ways. My dad passed away at age 56 from a heart attack. I was 26 at the time. When I was helping my Mom with his business, I came across a ledger book that listed all the people to whom he had given support over the years, either through direct financial support or loans. This book spanned over 30 years and

there were very few “balance paid” entries. My father never talked about this. My mother did not even know of its existence. And yet, this was a core tenet of faith carried in my father’s psyche that I saw him live out over and over and that was to help others when you can, even if inconvenient.

My father’s faith was very Catholic. We went to Mass every Sunday and prayed before every meal and at night before bed. We went to confession weekly. I would occasionally see my father kneeling by his bed and praying. We didn’t talk about God very much, but I knew he had a faith that guided him to live a life of honesty and integrity.

In reflecting on my father as I prepared this sermon, I realized I almost never heard him complain about his life. I never heard him say a negative comment about my mother. His great moments of complaint were about politics and government and almost always the source of the complaint was in regards to corruption or abusing the system for personal gain.

My father was a butcher with his business located in downtown Baltimore a few blocks from Johns Hopkins. In the first twenty years, the neighbor demographics changed from working class to mostly unemployed. When the Food Stamp program was launched in 1964, many of my father’s customers participated in that program. As a merchant, the food stamps collected were turned into cash when deposited at the bank. Some families were able to “game the system” and collect 2 or 3 or 4 times the number of food stamps to which they were entitled. Often they would offer to “sell” the food stamps to merchants like my father for 20 or 30 cents on the dollar in order to get cash to buy other things...sometimes those other things were drugs or alcohol or you name it...but they were not used for food purchases. This incensed my father on two fronts. One was the abuse of the food stamp program that increased the government waste and the other was the personal gain others would receive by buying the food stamps at a discount and turning that into cash. My father knew merchants who became millionaires engaging in this practice...and this is

when a million dollars meant something! My dad would not participate and as chair of the merchant's association in the city owned market where his business was located, he called for others to abandon that practice as well. He lost a lot of friends over that stance, but stuck to his convictions and never participated in the abuse of the system.

There is, of course, a lot more I could say about my Dad. He was far from perfect, as all of us are far from perfect. There were times I wanted a different dad or what I thought would have been a better dad. Today, I think of him through the lens of God's plan and purpose being worked out and the creation story unfolding and my father's role in helping to create who I've become. Today I am grateful for who he was and for the lessons he taught me. If I had to sum up some of the lessons I learned from him in regards to what I've shared today it would be this:

1. Work hard
2. Be kind to others
3. Respect authority
4. Follow the rules.

What about you? I think this would be a wonderful time to take a few minutes to reflect on what you learned from your father. We will take a short musical interlude (2 minutes and 30 seconds) and I invite you to write down a lesson or two that comes to mind when you think of your father's lessons shared. It may be a life lesson; a faith lesson or whatever comes to mind. As the music plays, if it is helpful to follow the lyrics as a meditative reflection, there is an insert in your bulletin with the lyrics to the music. (Chris Tomlin: Good, Good Father)

Take a few moments to bring to mind God's perfect love and the lessons you've been taught by your father.

Share the lessons: (use handheld mic #15).

3. Dual and Non Dual Thinking

What about our scripture reading today? This reading is from the RCL or Revised Common Lectionary. Now the folks who put together the lectionary know that today is Father's Day. So why this reading this day?

When we ponder some of the synonyms for Father, we have words like this: originator, initiator, founder, inventor, creator, maker, author, architect. None of those words are gender specific....each person, male or female can and are those things. So what is a Father? It seems helpful to consider different types of energy:

Masculine Energy vs Feminine Energy

doing vs being

aggression vs surrender

analytical vs intuitive

concrete vs abstract

impatient vs patient

striving vs tranquil

rushing vs nurturing

assertive vs receptive

left brain vs right brain

thrusting vs receiving

organization vs synthesizing

logical vs creative

busy vs calm

hard vs soft

controlling vs allowing

One of the wonderful characteristics of life is the continual evolution of thought and insight and action. In our spiritual growth and life, we continue to strive to move away from dualistic thinking: “either/or”; toward a more holistic nondual thinking: “and/also”. We can learn to hold concepts in connection that are often presented or held in conflict. So consideration of masculine the list above still reflects a bias toward either/or thinking in the phraseology of writing masculine versus feminine and contrasting the characteristics. Our choice of words often reveals our biases or our lack of specificity. Versus means “against, facing, confronting” or “as opposed to” or “in contrast with”. This one small word sets two ideas, concepts, or characteristics in conflict with each other and extending that further, encourages us to “choose” one or the other. One is “good” and one is “bad” depending upon the situation or our point of view. So we move from thinking “masculine versus feminine” to masculine and feminine. There is a time and place for all of these energies. I think my father demonstrated this connected energy quality in his life even if he might not have been able to explain it.

4. Each Generation’s Responsibility for Faith

You know what I love about Jesus? Well, there are a lot of things I love about Jesus, but one of the most exciting things about Jesus is he accepts and welcomes us as we are, but he never leaves us were we were when we first meet him. We are continually transformed. The spirit of Christ is with us this moment and creation is continuing to unfold and we are participating in that creation story...on an individual level and in community with others. This faith family is in a continuing creation story and that is exciting!

So why our scripture reading this morning for Father’s Day? I think it is to remind us that while we are participants in the creation of life on earth it is God who produces the growth. Any of us who have “father energy” are part of the process, but not the creators of the process. I love the beginning of our scripture verse: “*Then Jesus said,*

'This is what God's kingdom is like. It's as though someone scatters seed on the ground, then sleeps and wakes night and day. The seed sprouts and grows, but the farmer doesn't know how.'

Well, I don't know about you, but I often think of my own children's lives and what role I may have played and often have no idea "how" they have become the wonderful people they have become and continue to grow into becoming.

It is said that Christianity is never more than one generation away from extinction. That is a good and honest statement, but of course, very unlikely to happen given that Christianity in name has been in existence for almost two thousand years now. What is true however, and will continue to be true until we decide differently is that Christianity is often irrelevant in our lives. It seems that some of that sense of irrelevance is because many of us have inherited a faith that no longer works for us in this world and in this time...we have often inherited what has been called the "faith of our fathers".

How many of us have read and pondered our church by-laws? If you have, and we take membership in this faith family seriously, they are wonderful in so many ways. Here is a short excerpt:

ARTICLE 2.

THE UNDERLYING FAITH OF THE CHURCH

2.1 Overview

This Church claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers. **It affirms the responsibility of the Church in each generation to understand, express, renew, and make this faith its own.** This Church recognizes the Bible as the major source of information concerning the example and teachings of Jesus Christ. Each member shall have the undisputed right to follow the Word of God

according to the dictates of his or her conscience, under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.

2.2 Scripture: Our Beginnings

It is the responsibility of Christians, both as individuals and together, to study the Old and New Testaments. The Bible is the highest overt authority available in matters of faith, purpose, and the lifestyle of the Church. We are not constrained by literal, orthodox, or final interpretations of any passage. We seek the major themes of God's message and revelation to us. We hunger to find and understand the living dialogue and confrontation that God wishes to have with us through the events, persons, and proclamations in the Bible. Most of all we seek the meaning of salvation and of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as it is presented in the Scriptures and as it applies to us.

5. God's Unfolding and Continual Revelation

To treat the Bible as the final, complete revelation of God is to deny and negate God's continual interest and participation in the universe all the way into each of our individual lives. That is done through communication channels all around us and in our tradition most clearly received through prayer. Prayer and life are not separate. Prayer helps us see life more fully and more clearly in connection with the God of creation.

History is replete with folks using Scripture to defend the indefensible. We had a taste of it this week when the Attorney General cited a verse from Romans chapter 13 to defend the current administration's stance on illegal immigration that has led to the separation of children from their parents when prosecuted, forcing the children into shelters and foster homes. Over the years, Romans has been used as justification by Loyalists opposed to the American Revolution; Pro-slavery southerners to defend slavery and even by Christians in pre WWII Europe to defend Nazi rule. Despite the declaration by Jeff Sessions that Paul's writings are a "clear and wise command", what is abundantly clear in the light of 20-20 hindsight that the

things being attempted to justify are not clear and not wise, but wrong on so many levels. That is why we have not just one way to discern our paths. It is not prayer versus Bible or the Bible versus Disciple Bands, but prayer and Bible and Disciple Bands. Thank God for the totality of ongoing revelation!

6. Faith of our Fathers in Principle, Not In Specifics

In 1964 Bob Dylan wrote “*The Times They Are A’Changin’*”. That was 54 years ago, but it is true today and will always be true. God’s creation story and how we participate in it is the bold declaration that life continues to develop and we are called to be active and all of us are called to bring “father” energy to this unfolding creation story. The principles and truth of the faith we have inherited and the lessons we’ve learned are the seeds of that creation. The vision we bring is the personal creative force in concert with God’s plan. How that vision grows and comes to fruition? We are like the farmer in our scripture reading....we don’t know how, but we trust that if we are coming from a place of participation in humility before the God of creation, it will be good.

One of my favorite quotes is from one of our Congregationalist forefathers, John Robinson who was the pastor of the Separatists. As they prepared to set sail on the Mayflower, his parting words were: “*The Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.*”

Do we believe that? May we celebrate and honor all creative Father energy this day and celebrate and honor the faithful intent of all who are Fathers. And may all of us bring whatever God calls us to bring into the world so that the faith of our fathers becomes the faith of all of us...trusting in the plan; participating in the plan; inviting others to join us on this journey that we might all experience the full and abundant life into which we are called.

Amen.

God of creation...thank you for the ability and energy and vision you provide that gives each and every one of us the opportunity to participate in Kingdom creation here on earth. We turn to you now, praying as we were taught by our Lord and Savior....Our Father...