Sunday, June 18, 1978
FATHERS NEED LIBERATION TOO!
Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1-4

A magazine article I read last week said, “Fathers are getting it from all sides today. Psychologists and sociologists remind us of our inadequacies. If we are white and middle class, we are oppressors. At home we often hear about the gross inequalities in marriage and in our male-dominated institutions. It isn’t easy to be an open, loving, giving father when you feel under siege.”

Fatherhood is a role for which very few of us are prepared. And as far as we Christians are concerned there’s not much in the Bible about being a father and how we are to relate to our children. For that matter there’s not much in the Bible about being a mother either. There’s a lot more about how children are to relate to their parents and particularly their fathers. For example, the 4th commandment states, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you. “The book of Proverbs contains many suggestions about how children are to listen to their father’s instructions and wisdom. “A wise son hears his father’s instruction.”

About all that is said directly to fathers and how we are to act is what St. Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus--“Fathers do not provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Jesus Christ mentions the role of the father in some of his parables, for example, “What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will give him a scorpion? If you then who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

And there’s the parable of the prodigal son in which the father plays a major role. You know the story. A father had two sons and the younger one said, “Give me my share of what’s coming to me,“ and then the son took off and squandered his inheritance in loose living and finally wanted to come back home. He planned to ask his father’s forgiveness and was prepared to be as one of the servants. But his father saw him coming at a distance and ran out to meet him. He embraced his son, kissed him, forgave him, and held a big party in his honor.

Although these parables and others were told by Jesus to indicate God’s relationship to us, there is a lot implied in them and throughout the Bible about our own fatherhood.

More than anything else, however, Jesus Christ was acutely aware that as human beings we can and do become enslaved to cultural values and roles which may do us harm and in so doing we become less than human. Jesus was all the time freeing people or wanting to.

We can get all tied up in roles and images which hinder us in our relationships and in our development as human beings. Such is the case with some of us as males and as fathers. That’s why the title of this sermon is -- “Fathers need to be liberated too!”

What then are some of the patterns or roles or syndromes that we fathers need to be liberated from in our time?

1. First as males and fathers we need to be liberated from stress, from what some researchers call the “Type A personality.” Today, the average life expectancy for the white American male is 68.9 years, whereas for the female it is 76.7 years, nearly eight years longer. And the United States now ranks only 24th in the world in life expectancy for men.

In our society, men are much more susceptible to trauma and illness. Key indexes reveal that heart disease strikes twice as many men as women; that three men die of cancer for every two women; that four times more men than women die of respiratory diseases and twice as many of cirrhosis of the liver. In addition, men are three times more vulnerable to death from accidents, suicides, and murder.

Researchers are now concluding that the untimely death of American males is the result of social factors, not biological ones, and stress and tension are important components. In America today we have become more vulnerable to illness because we have lost many old sources of comfort and support, including religious belief, while being exposed to increasingly rapid social mobility and changes of all sorts.

As far as men and fathers are concerned, one theory now is that many of us are dying prematurely because we are pushing too hard to fill a certain false masculine image and this is partly what causes us to be the “Type A Personality,"· Thus today, one American male in five dies of a heart attack before the age of 60. While nutrition may be part of the cause, studies now show that the so-called Type A man is three times more likely to be stricken by a heart attack, and if he is under 50, the risk is ten times greater.

What is the Type A man like? The general picture is that he is ambitious, competitive, and aggressive, but more than anything else he is involved in a continual struggle against time and or other people. His sense of time urgency is acute. Almost always punctual, he is greatly annoyed if kept waiting. Delays in restaurants, at airports, or in traffic irritate him; and he is impatient with people who don’t come quickly to the point. He tends to do everything rapidly and yet usually feels way behind in doing everything he thinks he should — and worries inordinately about deadlines.

The Type A man regards his home primarily as a place to dress for work, and often his family plays only a small role in his life. He dislikes doing chores or getting involved in household matters. He values achievement and nothing about his home is achievement. If asked to list the most important events in his life, he would not list the birth of his children, or his marriage or anything like that, but rather his promotions at work, when he got his last pay raise, how much money he is making and the important people he has met.

Despite their drive to achieve, however, Type A’s are not necessarily the most successful even according to their own definition of success. Although Type A behavior doesn’t necessarily ·lead to success, it bears a striking resemblance to the American ideal, the style that ambitious parents often urge upon their sons. The type A man also gives the impression of iron will self-control.

About half of all American males, it has been estimated, are confirmed Type A’s compared to relatively few females. So, the first pattern that many of us fathers need to be liberated from is this kind of Type A personality.

2. Secondly and connected to it, we fathers need to be liberated from a kind of false masculine image. Too many of us have been taught or poured into a rather rigid male mold. Fathers in

this mold are not supposed to cry freely or complain freely and are not supposed to be gentle and loving or show· weakness or ask for help.

A real man or father must be aggressive and tough, achieve and win, not just once, but repeatedly. Based on values that ruled in frontier days, at least according to the movies, how after all can a man prove he is the toughest gun in town unless he is always ready to challenge his competitors, defeat his opponents, and destroy his enemies?

One of the major challenges facing fathers in our time is to break out of this false masculine image. Masculinity in this sense is predicated on too narrow a base, the work role. Defining a manor, a father, primarily as a producer and an achiever leads to a sickening way of life Ironically, being manly in this kind of way also makes it difficult for a man to recognize when he is sick. Trained to ignore his feelings in order to pursue his goals, he is less sensitive than women to inner signals that tell him all is not well. It may take a serious heart attack to get his attention and get the message across.

At the same time our overall society often exerts contradictory pressures on fathers. On hand we feel the pressure to support a family and get ahead, and on the other hand we feel some need to become more involved in family life, including child nurture. Sometimes of course, overinvolvement in one's job is a way of escaping family involvement. Yet society nudges fathers into work addiction and the disintegration of a million marriages a year in this country leaves many fathers physically and emotionally detached from their children.

3. All this leads to a third syndrome we fathers need to be liberated from — the syndrome of being non-emotional, cool, uninvolved in family relationships. Just being around home and witl1 children from time to time is not enough. I talk with children and young people all the time who tell me their father hasn't hugged them since they were very young or as far back as they can remember.

They remind me of a prayer I came across, "Lord, I keep thinking about that seventeen-year-old girl who told me her father hasn't hugged her since she was in the 7th grade. What makes fathers hold back their hugs? Is there someone waiting for a hug from me?"

Of course, there have always been warm fathers who feel both close to and responsible for the full care of their children, but our institutions and attitudes make things difficult for such fathers. For many men, learning to be genuinely paternal is made more difficult by the fact that they have never been encouraged or trained to take fatherhood seriously to begin with.

On the contrary, men in our culture are often depicted as being clumsy and inept in the domestic scene, even emotionally insensitive. This Dagwood Bumstead syndrome which portrays a man as bumbling and childish is widespread. So many fathers have been not only prepared but indoctrinated to fail their children. Thus, it is not surprising that a major trauma is often required to shake a man out of the safely detached paternal perch to which he has retreated. Sometimes this occurs only when the marriage, rather than the child has gone wrong. Then divorce jolts some men into confronting themselves as fathers for the first time.

One divorced man after twenty years of marriage described a movie scene which deeply affected him. The scene shows the end of a big Saturday outing where a father has taken his son hiking, bowling, and picnicking — everything the child had always wanted them to do together. About to be dropped off at home, the boy says, "You know, it's really much better having you and mom separated." Then the fat her asks him why, the boy replies, "Well, you

know how you' re always so busy, and worried about work, and making up lists of everything you have to do. And now I finally made your list!"

Fortunately, among many fathers, attitudes are changing. A new concept of fatherhood is gradually emerging, due in part to the breakdown of stereotyped sex roles, but also due to an increasing understanding that in an impersonal society, men have an emotional need for their family.

The new father, says Edwin Nichols of the National Institute for Mental Health, no longer considers childcare to be strictly women's work. He is much more aware of his child's emotional needs and. he actively and intimately nurtures them.

It is important for us fathers to cultivate this side of ourselves without waiting for a divorce or other trauma to occur. It is important not simply for the sake of our children, but also for our own enrichment and growth. Forging a deeper, closer connection to the younger gene-ration is a way of validating who we are, what we have learned and experienced and it is a way of retaining our humanity.

There are two priceless gifts we can give our children. One is the gift of relating to them as authentic, growing persons, the other is relating to our spouses in a growing, loving way. Our children need to have warm loving relationships with adults of both sexes in order to develop their full personalities.

"If I were to define a liberated father," said one person recently, "I would say that such a man finds as much satisfaction in relationships with his children and takes as much responsibility for their physical and emotional care as he does in and for his job, career or other activities." To do this we have to 1et go of the be1ief that a male person lacks the nurturing and empathetic qualities we ascribe to female persons. These are human traits and are not the property of either male or female.

We have to view a man as the Bible does, not simply as success and power oriented, but as a nice and gentle person with feelings like any ordinary person.

For us as Christians, liberation is from whatever blocks the use of our gifts. If we fathers learn more and more to nurture and affirm the tender side of our natures, then perhaps also the impetus toward a more benevolent society will increase. Amen.