Sunday, June 18, 1989
WHAT JESUS LEARNED FROM HIS FATHER
Luke 15:11-24

This past May 14, Mother's Day, the sermon was entitled, "What Jesus Learned From His Mother." Today, on Father's Day, fathers get equal time as we consider the theme, "What Jesus Learned From His Father."

What do we know about Joseph, the husband of Mary and the father of Jesus? The New Testament accounts of Jesus and the family from which he came make little mention of Joseph, so that what we know about him and what Jesus learned from him, we have to glean mostly from reading between the lines.

We know at least these things: Matthew's Gospel traces the family tree of Joseph forty-one generations back to King David, and then, including Jesus, forty-two generations. In other words, the early church considered Jesus to be the son of Joseph, and therefore a descendant of King David.

In the birth stories of Jesus, Joseph gets more attention in the Gospel of Matthew than he does in the Gospel of Luke. When Luke introduces us to Mary, he says that she was a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. That's why the couple went to Bethlehem for the Roman census, because it was the hometown of Joseph's family.

Then in the Gospel of Matthew, we are told that when Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant and he knew he wasn't the biological father, he considered breaking the engagement. But as he was contemplating this decision, he had a dream in which God spoke to him through an angel and said in effect, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child she is carrying is a very special one." Joseph listened to God and took Mary as his wife. And six or seven months later, the baby was born.

Later in Bethlehem, after the birth of Jesus and the visit of the Wise Men, Joseph had another dream in which he was told to take the child and his mother to Egypt, in order to save the baby's life. After some time in Egypt, God spoke to Joseph in another dream and told him it was now safe to return to his native country. The family then settled in the town of Nazareth in Galilee, where Joseph continued his trade as a carpenter.

Nothing more is heard about Joseph in the Gospels until Jesus was 12 years old. The family had gone to Jerusalem for the Holy Days, and on the journey home, they discovered that Jesus had stayed behind. So Joseph and Mary returned to the city to search for him and found him in the Temple.

After that, Joseph disappears from the pages of the New Testament.

What then are some of the things Jesus must've learned from Joseph, his father?

In the first category, I think Jesus must've learned some very practical and necessary things from his father. For example, he no doubt learned the trade of carpentry. He learned how to join two pieces of wood together and how to keep his tools sharp and clean. As I was working on this sermon, I was reminded of some of the very practical things I learned from my dad. He taught me always to park the car, the truck, or the tractor in the shade if possible. And in like

manner, to always put the car and the other machinery away in the shed for the night. He also taught me to clean the tools I had been working with when finished for the day so they would be ready for the next day, so they would not rust, and so they would last for a long time.

In a second category, I believe that Jesus learned a lot about faith in God from his father and that God requires that we "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." Here's some evidence for that in more detail.

Note first that in Matthew's Gospel, Joseph is described as being a "just man." We are told that when he discovered that his bride-to-be was pregnant, and he knew he was not the father, he decided that he didn't want to embarrass Mary in any way. Furthermore, when God spoke to Joseph in a dream and told him to go through with the marriage, Joseph did so.
Thus we can assume that Joseph was a kind, caring man with a deep sense of justice. He also did not take hasty action. He didn't panic easily. He didn't jump to unwarranted conclusions. He considered first what effect his actions would have on others.

I believe that Jesus got his sense of justice from Joseph, in addition to others. He also learned patience from his father. He learned to care for other people.

Secondly, Joseph was a man of deep religious faith. I believe he was, in the best sense of the word, a mystic. Those of us who have little or no faith rarely have dreams or visions that guide us. Joseph was ready and waiting to listen to God. He must've had a close relationship with God. He must also have been a man of prayer. It took a man of deep faith and prayer to marry a woman who was pregnant with a child that was not his and to do so because he believed it was God's will.
I believe that Jesus learned to have faith in God and to trust God because his father Joseph trusted in God. Jesus also learned to pray by following his father's example.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is always portrayed as an outstanding example of a woman of faith and one who trusted in God, and I'm certain she was. But equally so was Joseph. After his dream, he took Mary as his wife and remained obedient to the word of God. His faith remained strong as he continued to listen and pay attention to what God would have him do.

Jesus inherited from Joseph a deep religious faith, which included an active prayer life.

A third fact to remember about Joseph is that he must've been a loving, understanding, and forgiving father to Jesus and to the other children in the family. It is a tribute to Joseph that Jesus constantly used the metaphor of "Father" when speaking of God. And he considered God to be a God of love and mercy.
Furthermore, in many of his parables, Jesus used a loving, forgiving human father as a central figure. The most telling example is the parable of the prodigal son, which could also be called the parable of the loving and forgiving father.

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 all of his inheritance in loose living. When he finally hit bottom, he wanted to come back home. He worked and reworked the speech he would make to his father in asking for his forgiveness, and he was prepared to be as one of the servants. But when his father saw him coming at a distance, he ran out to meet him. He embraced his son, kissed him, forgave him, and held a big party in his honor.

I believe that Jesus learned something of God's merciful and unconditional forgiveness through his own father's forgiving spirit.

Even though our own fatherhood and motherhood are at best a dim reflection of the fatherhood and motherhood of God, they are often the basis from which our children begin to understand the love of God.

Frederick Buechner wrote: "When a child is born, a father is born. A mother is born too, of course, but at least for her, it's a gradual process. Body and soul, she has nine months to get used to what's happening. She becomes what's happening. But even for the best-prepared father, it happens all at once."

Today I ask you to ponder, "What did you learn from your father?" The good things and the not-so-good things? And if you are a father yourself, then ask the further question—"What are my children learning from me?" Does it add to or detract from the metaphor of God as father? Amen.