Sunday, June 16, 1991
FATHERS AND THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD
John 14:1-7

All of us in the Christian faith with its Hebrew heritage are familiar with the word “Father” when referring to God. Every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we begin, “Our Father who art in heaven.” Biblical scholars continually remind us that “Father” is a metaphor and that it is difficult to talk about God without using metaphors. The scholars also remind us that many of the Biblical metaphors used in relation to God are masculine because of the patriarchal culture in which the Bible was written. Thus, in addition to God as Father, we are familiar with other masculine metaphors such as “Lord” and “King” when referring to God.

Yet, the Old Testament of the Bible, which is three times the size of the New Testament, uses the metaphor of God as Father only 25 times, and then it is generally a reference to God as Father to the chosen people, the Hebrews. The New Testament provides a definite contrast, for there we find the metaphor of God as Father used 150 times and always in a more personal sense — God as the Father of the individual. Jesus used the metaphor most frequently in speaking of God as being his Father. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places.” “If you know me, you will know my Father also.”

Given the bias of a patriarchal culture, it is understandable why masculine metaphors were frequently used. What is surprising, however, is the number of times God is also referred to in feminine terms and metaphors, especially in the Old Testament. In the prophet Hosea, God is compared to a Hebrew mother who teaches the child to walk, heals the child’s wounds, and feeds the child.

In the tradition of the Exodus, God provides for those necessities that were always obtained through a woman’s work — food and water. In the prophet Nehemiah, God is a seamstress, the same as in the Book of Genesis when God made garments to cover the naked Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Isaiah speaks of God as having birth pangs and describes God as a mother comforting her children. At another place in the Old Testament, God’s remembrance of Zion is compared to the love of a nursing mother and the work of a midwife.

So, while the Bible is primarily patriarchal in its metaphors, there are many grand exceptions. And as we read and study the Bible, we discover that the overall purpose of Biblical faith is not the perpetuation of patriarchy, but rather the blessing of women and men together in their full and equal co-humanity. There is no sexism in the love and blessing of God as revealed by Jesus. In the New Testament, the actions of Jesus show that he crossed over the boundaries of sex, national origin, status, and cultural practices in order to minister to people — both women and men. He broke the traditional customs in order to speak to a Samaritan woman. He ignored customary barriers in permitting a woman to anoint him with expensive ointment and praised her for her devotion.

In all four Gospels, Jesus is never reported as speaking or acting towards women in a derogatory fashion. He treated all people as equals and as human beings who are loved by God.

I mention all of this because, on this Father’s Day, I want to talk about the Fatherhood of God. It can be a very useful metaphor, and it can instruct us in our own fatherhood as long as we

remember it is only a metaphor. In the same way, we can also speak of the motherhood of God as long as we remember it is also a metaphor.

Jesus could speak in very personal terms of God as being like a father because of the experience he had with his earthly father, Joseph. According to the New Testament stories, Joseph was a “just man,” and in addition, loving and caring. He was also a man of deep religious faith and a mystic. God spoke to him frequently in dreams and visions.

There are those among us, however, who may have difficulty in thinking of God as being like a father because their life experience with their own father has not been that positive.

In what ways did Jesus reveal the “Fatherhood” of God? The nature of God’s “Fatherhood” can be seen most clearly in many of the parables which Jesus told. Perhaps the most telling example is the figure of the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. This parable could also be called the parable of the loving and forgiving father because the father is the central figure in the story.

We know the story — how the father forgave and welcomed his son back into the household with no reservations. We also know how the father equally loved the older brother in the same household. Although Jesus doesn’t say it specifically in the story, I believe that when the father ran to meet his son and hugged him, there were many tears in the father’s eyes as well as the son’s. Jesus wanted us to understand and remember that God’s father-love is unconditional and never-ending, and that our love toward others is to be the same. That’s why Jesus said in another place, “Be merciful even as your Father in heaven is merciful.”

The greatest compliment one can pay anyone — mother, father, friend, grandparent, teacher — is that he or she is merciful and compassionate.

In his book, “The Manger Is Empty,” Walter Wangerin Jr. tells the story of what mercy and compassion did in his relationship as a father with his young son, Matthew, and how that helped him to understand more fully the fatherhood of God.

When his son Matthew was in the 2nd grade, Wangerin discovered that he was stealing comic books from the local library. When he asked Matthew where he got the comic books, he lied and said he had checked them out from the library. He made Matthew return the comic books, and Matthew promised never to steal again.

But the following fall, he discovered Matthew had stolen some comic books from a drugstore in another city while they were visiting there the past summer. It was impossible to return them, so this time Wangerin burned the comic books in the fireplace while Matthew watched. Once more, Matthew promised that he would never steal comic books again.

A year later, Matthew stole comic books again — a third time. He hadn’t changed. Wangerin came to the conclusion that now he had no choice but to punish his son. Listen to what happened as he tells it in his own words:

“Matthew, go to my study. Wait for me. I’m going to spank you.” Wordlessly, he went. He closed the door. And then we both waited while in my head I planned the event ahead of me. Nothing should be done in anger, nothing in passion purely.”

“So I went into my study, where Matthew sat small in the largest chair, his face both down and distant from me. The separation killed me. The child was mute in mystery. Then how could I reach his soul to change it?”

“I repeated the law and the deed that broke the law. Did he understand? He nodded. But then he always nodded. Did he understand why I had to spank him? He nodded.”

“I spanked him. He did not cry. Then I carried him back to his chair and set him down and told him that I would leave him alone for a while, but that I would be back. Alone, I thought, because if he should cry, he could do so in privacy, but without the sense that I wanted to see his tears. Matthew, however, wasn’t crying. I left the room. And then I burst into tears. Oh, this was more than I could stand. I bowed down and covered my face and sobbed. Matthew’s mother came to see what the matter was, but I could only hug her and lean on her and not speak. I was so sorry, so frightened and sorry. In a few moments, I was quiet. I went to the kitchen and washed my face and returned to my study again. Discipline could not be over with the pain. Something better had to follow — and if I’d touched my son to hurt him, it seemed necessary to touch him again in kindness.”

“So I sat and recited again, all over again, the thing that had been wrong, the thing that should be right. And I said, ‘I love you. I love you, Matthew. I will never not love you.’ And then I got up and hugged him. I hugged him very, very hard.”

“Never, never again did the boy steal comic books or any other thing. What wasn’t true, however, was how I thought the change had occurred in my son. Years after that spanking, Matthew and his mother were driving home from the shopping center. They were discussing things that had happened in the past. The topic of comic books came up. They talked of how he used to steal them and how long the practice continued. Matthew said, ‘But you know, Mom, I haven’t stolen comic books for a long, long time.’ His mother said, ‘I know.’ Matthew then asked, ‘Do you know why I stopped the stealing?’ ‘Sure,’ said his mother. ‘Because Dad spanked you.’ ‘No, Mom,’ said Matthew. He shook his head at his mother’s mistake. ‘No,’ he said, ‘but because Dad cried.’”

Love accomplished what the law could not. The fatherhood of God speaks of God’s mercy and compassion. Let it be so for all of us. Amen.