Sunday, June 17, 2001
JESUS AND THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD
John 14:1-7

Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught us, we begin, "Our Father who art in heaven." Jesus frequently used the metaphor of "father" when referring to God. He got that from his Hebrew heritage and his knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures.

In the scripture reading for today, Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many rooms." When he was dying on the cross, he prayed, "Father, forgive them."

It is difficult to talk about God without using metaphors such as "father," or "shepherd," or "Lord," as in "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Bible scholars remind us that many of the Biblical metaphors for God are masculine because of the patriarchal culture in which the Bible came into being.

Yet the Hebrew scriptures, which we usually call the Old Testament and which is three times the size of the New Testament, use the metaphor of God as Father only 25 times. The New Testament uses the metaphor of God as Father much more often, with Jesus using it most frequently in speaking of God.

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 Hebrew scriptures.

Although Jesus used the term "Father" in speaking of God, there is no sexism in the love and blessing of God as revealed by him. In the New Testament, his actions show that he continually crossed over cultural and other barriers in order to minister to people, both women and men.

He broke traditional customs and religious rules when he spoke to a Samaritan woman. He ignored cultural barriers and religious law when he permitted a woman to anoint him with expensive ointment. He praised her for her devotion.

In all four gospels, Jesus is never reported as speaking to or treating a woman in a derogatory manner. He treated all people as equals and as human beings who are created in God's image and loved by God.

I want to talk about the fatherhood of God. I believe that in spite of the patriarchal bias in the Bible, the term "father" can be a useful metaphor, and it can instruct us in our own fatherhood as long as we remember that it is only a metaphor. In the same way, it is helpful to speak of the motherhood of God as long as we remember it is a metaphor.

I am convinced that Jesus could speak in very personal terms of God as being like a father because of the positive experience he had with his human father, Joseph. According to the stories in the New Testament, Joseph was a "just man," and also a loving and caring husband and father. He experienced the presence of God frequently in dreams and visions.

The loving nature of God as a father in his relationship to Jesus and to us can be seen most clearly in many of the parables. The most telling example is the portrayal of the loving father in

the parable of the prodigal son. In fact, many biblical scholars are convinced that the story should be called the parable of the loving and forgiving father because he is the central figure in the story.

You know the story. The father forgave and welcomed his son back into the household with no hesitation. Although Jesus didn't say it specifically in the parable, it is implied that when the father ran to meet his son and hugged him, there were tears in both the father's and the son's eyes. The story tells us that God's "father-love" is unconditional and never-ending, and that our love toward others is to be the same. Jesus said in another place, "Be merciful, even as your Father in heaven is merciful."

This is not the usual picture of a strong father. Because we've developed a flat, one-dimensional "macho man" concept of fatherhood, we expect that if this father is true to his male genes, he'll either bar the gates and send his scoundrel son packing, or at the very least, he'll give him a job working the stables and living with the servants.

The father in this story doesn't act that way, and in fact behaves in quite the opposite manner, showing tenderness, forgiveness, and mercy. Here we get a glimpse of God's full acceptance of those who rebel and return. The story demonstrates just how committed God is to reconciliation.

The greatest compliment you can pay anyone — father, mother, friend, grandparent, or teacher — is that he or she is merciful and compassionate. I am convinced that one of the reasons that Jesus could understand God's fatherly love is because he experienced that from his human father.

Even though our 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.

What else did Jesus learn from his father that directly or indirectly helped him in understanding God as being like a father? I'm sure that he learned very practical and necessary skills. For example, he certainly learned the trade of carpentry — how to cut and join wood and how to build and repair things.

As I was working on this sermon and trying to imagine what Jesus learned from his human father, it helped me to remember some of the many positive things I learned from my dad. Because we lived on a small farm, over and over he said to me and to my brother and sisters, "Be sure to park the tractor, the truck, the car, and other machinery in the shade if at all possible." And at night, when you bring the machinery home, be sure to put it in the shed. I think of my dad frequently because whenever I'm looking for a place to park the car at night, I always put it in the garage.

He taught us to respect the tools we used and to keep them clean and sharp so they would be ready for the next day and would not rust, but would last for a long time. He kept reminding us to treat the animals on the farm with gentleness — to rest the team of horses when necessary and to be sure they had ample water and food.

I also learned from Dad, as I'm sure Jesus did from Joseph, how to build, fix, or at least try to repair almost anything. Whenever a new barn or shed was needed, Dad would build it.

Whenever a piece of farm machinery broke down or something else around the place needed repair, he would do it, and I was frequently by his side, watching, helping, and learning.

As I'm sure Joseph taught Jesus, my dad taught his children how to work and how to enjoy working. He taught us this by working alongside us. This working together also gave us a lot of time for conversation.

I learned from my dad a love of all kinds of music and a love for dancing. He also loved music, and as we were growing up, each one of us learned to play a musical instrument. For a time, we had a small family orchestra. We were also encouraged to participate in all the musical groups the local high school had to offer and to sing in the church choirs.

I believe Jesus learned from his dad to have a love for all of life and to enjoy God's creation. That's an important role for fathers in any age.

I learned from my dad the value of an education and that it is a life-long process. Although he had little formal education and officially did not finish school, he continued to read and learn all his life. Because of his own lack of formal education, he wanted all of his children to obtain as much as possible.

As a result, his six living children all finished college with a bachelor's degree, and most of us have gone on to get graduate degrees. He was proud of all of us for doing that, more than anything he accomplished himself.

I believe Jesus learned from his father the value of an education. He was schooled in the local synagogue. He was frequently called "Rabbi" or teacher.

I am convinced that Jesus learned from both his father and mother a great deal about faith in God. I know I learned a lot from my dad in this regard. Although he was not an outwardly pious man, he was a man of faith and a regular church participant, as was my mother. Together, all of the family were in worship each Sunday. Yet no one was more surprised than my dad when I told him one day that I planned to become a minister. He did not try to talk me out of it, but he encouraged me to follow my vision.

I remember how pleased he was when he was able to visit and worship in the congregations I served.

Being a father is an awesome responsibility. 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 on this Father's Day, I ask you to ponder: What did you learn from your father? The good things and the bad things? And if you are a father yourself, then ask the follow-up question: What are my children learning from me? Does it add or detract from the understanding of the metaphor of God as a father? Amen.