Sunday, June 15, 2003
TWO FATHERS
Romans 8:14-17

Today, the third Sunday in June, on most calendars is known as “Father’s Day.” The idea for creating a day to honor fathers began in Spokane, Washington. A woman named Sonora Smart Dodd thought of the idea for Father’s Day while listening to a Mother’s Day sermon in 1909 in her local church. You can never tell what a sermon might do.

Sonora, along with five other children, was raised by her father, William Jackson Smart, after her mother died while giving birth to her sixth child. She remembered how her dad raised all six children as a single parent. She recalled that he was a courageous, selfless, and loving man. Her dad was born in June, so she chose to hold the first Father’s Day celebration in Spokane, Washington, on June 19, 1910. In 1926, a National Father’s Day Committee was formed in New York City. Father’s Day was recognized by a joint resolution of Congress in 1956. In 1972, President Richard Nixon established a permanent national observance of Father’s Day to be held on the third Sunday in June.

Jesus had two fathers, and he knew it. He spoke of God as being his father, and he had Joseph as his father. There’s that wonderful story in Luke’s gospel about Jesus and his family going to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover when he was 12 years old. On the way back to Nazareth, Joseph and Mary assumed he was with family as they traveled. To their dismay, he was missing. They went back to Jerusalem to find him. After searching for several days, they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

When his parents expressed their disappointment in his behavior and how worried they were, he is reported as having said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Then the story goes on to say that he returned home with his parents and was obedient to them. He was doing his best to be obedient to both of his fathers and his mother.

Each one of you hearing this sermon has two fathers or maybe more. I’m sure that most of you use the term “Father” as a metaphor for God. Whenever you pray the Lord’s Prayer, you say, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” It is difficult to talk about God without using metaphors such as “Father,” “Shepherd,” “Mother,” or “Lord,” as in “The Lord is my shepherd.” The New Testament uses the metaphor of God as Father 150 times and always in a very personal sense. Jesus used the word “Father” most frequently when speaking of God.

Each one of you also has a biological father. Some of you have a stepfather, an adoptive father, a father-in-law, a grandfather, and maybe even a great-grandfather. You could also have other men who have fulfilled a “father” role in your life — a scoutmaster, a teacher, a coach, an uncle, a friend, a mentor — and you could be a father yourself. On Father’s Day, it is appropriate to honor all these fathers.

What is known about Joseph, the husband of Mary, one of the two fathers of Jesus? There’s not a lot of information. Matthew’s gospel traces the family tree of Joseph forty-one generations back to King David.

In the birth stories of Jesus, Joseph gets more attention in the Gospel of Matthew than he does in Luke's account. According to Matthew, when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant, and he knew he wasn't the biological father, he considered breaking the engagement. However, God told him in a dream, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child she is carrying is a very special one." Joseph listened to God and took Mary as his wife. About six or seven months later, the baby was born.

Later in Bethlehem, 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 there, God told him in another dream that it was now safe to return to his own country. The family then settled in Nazareth in Galilee, where Joseph continued his trade as a carpenter. There, Joseph and Mary had more children.

Nothing more is heard about Joseph in the Bible stories until Jesus was 12 years old. It's the story I mentioned earlier about the trip to Jerusalem. Following that narrative, Joseph disappears from the pages of the Bible.

Although the Bible does not mention it, one tradition maintains that Joseph died when Jesus was a young man. As the first-born son in the family, Jesus took charge, probably earning enough money to support the family by continuing Joseph's carpentry business until the other children were on their own. In one sense, as the oldest son, Jesus filled the role of father in the family for a time. He then began his public ministry when he was thirty years old.

As the oldest child in the family, Jesus must've learned a great deal from Joseph, one of his two fathers. I'm convinced he learned some very practical and necessary skills. He was taught such carpentry tasks as how to join two pieces of wood together. He learned how to keep his tools clean and sharp. He was taught how to repair items in the home. He learned how to build things.

As I was imagining some of the things Jesus learned from Joseph, his earthly father, I remembered some of the very practical lessons I learned from my dad. He taught me to clean every tool after I had used it and to keep the tools sharp. He emphasized how important it was to return the shovels, hammers, and other tools to where they were normally kept so they wouldn't get lost. He always taught me and my sisters and brothers to park the car, the truck, and the tractor in the shade whenever possible.

I'm also convinced that Jesus learned much about God, his other Father, from Joseph. That's why the metaphor of God as Father meant so much to him. He learned from Joseph to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God."

In the gospel stories, Joseph is described as being a "just man." When he discovered his bride-to-be was pregnant, and he knew he was not the father, he decided he didn't want to embarrass Mary. And when God spoke to him in a dream and told him to go through with the marriage, he did so.

So you can assume that Joseph was a kind, caring man with a deep sense of compassion and justice. He did not panic and take hasty action. He didn't jump to unwarranted conclusions. He considered what effect his actions might have on others. In being compassionate and just, Jesus had a powerful example in Joseph.

Joseph was also a man of deep religious faith. He was, in the best sense of the word, “a mystic.” He was not afraid to pay attention to his dreams and visions. He was open to letting God guide him. He must’ve been a man of prayer. It took a man of strong 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 Jesus learned to have faith in God as a loving Father from Joseph, his other father. In his parables, especially the one about the prodigal son, where the forgiving father is the central character, it is obvious that Jesus learned something of God’s mercy and unconditional forgiveness through Joseph’s loving and forgiving spirit.

I’m convinced that Joseph must have 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 to God. He considered God to be a God of love and mercy.

Jesus’ experience of God as Father was not the fearsome, frightening, terror-filled experience that sometimes is portrayed in movies and stories of the relationship of sons and daughters with obsessive, autocratic, domineering fathers. Jesus thought of God as “Abba,” a loving Creator. His concept of God as a Father was that of being affirmed; a God who would say, “You are my son, and I am so proud of you. In you I am well pleased.” If more sons and daughters would regularly hear those words of affirmation from their earthly fathers, a lot of counselors would not have so many clients. Also, a lot of people would not have so much trouble with the metaphor of God as being like a father.

The Bible stories are filled with descriptions of Jesus spending time with God as his “Abba,” or Father. When he was spiritually dry, he would go apart so that he could be in communion with God. The wisdom, the insight, the direction, and the inspiration in his life came from God as his Father. When he was dying on the cross and experienced the absence of his Father God, he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” A short while later, as he was dying, he released his spirit into the trusting presence of the One he had known intimately all his life, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

I believe the Apostle Paul heard these stories about Jesus because Paul also frequently used the metaphor of “Father” when speaking of God. In his letter to the church in Rome, he wrote: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God… When we cry, ‘Abba Father,’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

So many sons and daughters would love to spend more happy times with their dads. A young woman whose parents were divorced when she was three years old told me about a very special day with her dad. They rarely saw each other after the divorce, even though they lived in the same city. On her 14th birthday, her dad invited her to dinner. She said it was the first time she ever had a date with him. She dressed carefully and beautifully for the occasion. Her mother put her on a city bus so she could meet him downtown at his office, and they would go from there to a place for lunch. Looking back, she remembered it as being a very important event, but also an awkward one for her. She didn’t know what to talk about. A year later, her dad died of cancer. She never got to know him when she was an adult, and she still feels a void in her life.

Even though our own fathering and mothering 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.

On this Father's Day weekend, I once again ask you to remember all those who have been a father to you, and also your Father God. And if you are a father yourself, then ask, "What are my children learning from me? Does it add or detract from the understanding of God as being like a father?" Amen.