Sunday, June 20, 2004
FATHERS AND BREAD
Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1-4

Mother's Day has always been more popular than Father's Day in our culture. Maybe it's because Mother's Day has been around for a longer time, but there may be other reasons too. Here's a short history of Father's Day, which I mentioned in the Father's Day sermon last year.

The idea for naming a day to honor fathers began in Spokane, Washington. Sonora Smart Dodd thought of the idea for Father's Day while listening to a Mother's Day sermon in 1909. It's amazing what the consequences of a sermon might be.

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. Her dad was born in June, so she decided to hold the first Father's Day celebration in Spokane, Washington, on the 19th of June, 1910. In 1926, a National Father's Day Committee was formed in New York City. Father's Day was recognized by Congress in 1956. In 1972, President Richard Nixon established a permanent national observance of Father's Day in June.

Not only because it has a longer history, I am convinced there are other reasons why Mother's Day is also more celebrated than Father's Day. For example, I've noticed that when athletes are interviewed on television, they usually say, "Hi, Mom," but rarely say, "Hi, Dad." Or when people think the television camera might spot them at a sports event or some other place, individuals are more likely to hold up a sign that says, "Hi, Mom," than "Hi, Dad." Maybe that's because people who have been raised by a single parent are more likely to have had their mother present. Another reason is that mothers have been more nurturing in the raising of children than fathers, while fathers are more absent. There are, of course, exceptions to this.

Biblical scholars have pointed out that fathers in Bible stories are more problematic than mothers. Moses was a revered leader of the Jewish people, but there is nothing in the tradition that ties him to his two sons in any positive way. In the Hebrew tradition, Moses' neglect of his sons is considered the cause of their not emerging as leaders. He was not a good father. Before that, it was the mother of Moses who saved his life when she placed him in the river.

On the positive side, Jewish and Christian traditions insist that fatherhood is not necessarily biological. The man who takes a leading role in raising the child is the true father. Men who are teachers are like fathers, so much so that in the Biblical tradition, their honor takes precedence, especially in those situations where the father is only a biological relationship, and it is the teacher who provides what a father should provide — guidance, friendship, direction, and love.

It is also significant that in the 5th commandment of the 10, both mothers and fathers are listed. "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you." This commandment has been interpreted to include honoring all adults in your life that fulfill the role of father and mother.

The Book of Proverbs in the Bible contains many suggestions about how children are to listen to their father's instructions and wisdom. For example, "A wise son hears his father's instructions."

Even St. Paul had some advice for fathers. He wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Jesus mentions the role of the father in some of his teachings. He said, “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 to those who ask.”

The best example Jesus gives of a loving father is in the parable known as the “Prodigal Son.” In this story, a younger son said, “Give me my share of what’s coming to me,” and then he left home and squandered his inheritance in reckless living. He decided to return home and ask his father’s forgiveness and was prepared to be as one of the servants. But his father, who had been hoping for his return and waiting, saw him coming at a distance and ran to meet him. He embraced him, forgave him even before he asked, and held a big party to celebrate his return. This story should be named the “Parable of the Loving Father.”

I am convinced that Joseph and Jesus had a very good father-son relationship, and that is one of the reasons Jesus was able to understand the love of God as a heavenly Father.

Although these stories were told by Jesus to illustrate God’s relationship to us, there is a lot implied in them and throughout the Bible about our own fatherhood. Here are a few of those implications.

First of all, human fathers are to be loving and forgiving in the same way as God is loving and forgiving. This means that fathers in our culture especially need to be liberated from a kind of false masculine image, which suggests that men are to always be tough and aggressive while being nurturing is de-emphasized. Always winning becomes too important.

Secondly, this means that fathers need to be liberated from the idea of always being cool, detached, and uninvolved in family relationships. Too many dads operate on the assumption that mothers are to do most of the nurturing. I talk with children and young people all the time who tell me that their dad hasn’t hugged them since they were very young or as far back as they can remember. I hear this more from sons than from daughters.

A father once wrote, “Lord, I keep thinking about that seventeen-year-old girl who told me her father hasn’t hugged her since she was in the third grade. What makes fathers hold back their hugs? Is there someone waiting for a hug from me?”

Of course, there have always been warm, caring fathers who feel both close to and responsible for the care of their children. What is needed is for more dads to do this. What better gift can a father give to his children, and especially his sons, than that of being an affectionate, caring dad? A son learns how to be a father from his own father.

It is significant that each year on Father’s Day in our congregation, we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion because there is a relationship between fathers and bread. Fathers in families have often been described as being the “breadwinners.”

A recent survey showed that although dads play a range of roles in the family, most still see themselves primarily as breadwinners, but that is changing.

For many years, when mothers did not have salaried jobs or professions, it was the income of the father or husband that provided most of the money for food and other necessities, and it was the mother's labor in the home that produced the bread. Now, in many families, it is both fathers and mothers who earn money from which food is purchased and eaten. Both incomes also contribute to the other necessities of life.

The symbolism of bread in Holy Communion and in our lives together as human beings has another and deeper meaning. One Sunday morning in this church, following a worship service in which Holy Communion had been celebrated, a young girl about five years old came forward to look more closely at the elements of communion on the communion table. She asked me if she could examine the bread, so I took one of the bread trays off the table and held it down close at her eye level. She took one of the bread cubes in her hands, studied it carefully for a moment, and then said, "Why, it's just a piece of bread."

Of course. She was right. It was just a piece of bread, the kind of bread many people around the world eat each day. But as a symbol, it's much more than that. Bread reminds us that life is social, not a solitary endeavor. We depend on strangers, from the farmer to the baker to the delivery person to the grocery store. The Lord's Prayer, which we recite, says, "Give us this day our daily bread." It's plural. Jesus did not teach us to pray, "Give me this day my daily bread."

The symbol of bread goes even deeper than that. The followers of Jesus discovered that it was when they ate together, that they experienced the presence of Jesus among them in a powerful way. It reminded them — and it reminds us — that the holy presence of God is among us in such simple things as eating and drinking together.

Take it one step further. When you take a piece of bread, you are taking more than a piece of bread. You take something in which the sun, the rain, and the earth have participated. You take with this bread the mystery of rain falling on the earth; the mystery of darkness, of the seed grain in the earth; of this seed sprouting and growing and ripening. You participate in the mystery of how human beings ever discovered that these grains of wheat could be ground into flour and how people learned to bake bread with the heat of a fire.

This bread speaks of that long, patient climb of human beings from the past to the present. Furthermore, this bread feeds your body and mind, and out of your body and mind come your thoughts and emotions and those spiritual longings that make up your life and make possible your love for God and for others.

At still another level, this bread is made up of molecules and atoms and electrons and protons and neutrons and other smaller bits of energy which are the same as all other things in creation, only in differing arrangements. At the deepest level of our existence, there is a mystic oneness and unity that we only dimly perceive.

When you eat this bread and drink the cup, you are remembering that as human beings, created in God's image, we are sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers to each other. We are dependent on each other. We need each other. On this Father's Day, remember also the men in your life who have been a father to you — your biological father, your step-father if you have one, your grandfathers, your father-in-law, and those teachers who have been like fathers to you. If you are a father, then also remember to nurture your children. Remember that

only being the “breadwinner” is not enough. Give your children yourself as the “bread of life.” Amen.