Sunday June 19, 2005

WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY DAD

Matthew 7:7-11

What did I learn from my dad? What did you learn from yours? What did Jesus learn from his father? If you are a father, what do you hope your children will learn or have learned from you? What is the relationship between human fatherhood and the fatherhood of God? These are some of the questions I want you to consider on this Father's Day.

"Father" is a very important word in the Bible. In the Ten Commandments, the fifth commandment states: "Honor your father and your mother." Jesus often spoke of God as being his father and he had Joseph as his father. In one of his well-known

parables, which is frequently referred to as the parable of the prodigal son, the waiting, loving and forgiving father is the main character. I like to imagine that when Jesus told this story, he had in mind not only his heavenly father, God, but also his earthly father, Joseph. The story gives an example of the kind of loving and forgiving father God is. It is also an example for all of us who are fathers.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel, Jesus also had a loving heavenly father and his father Joseph in mind when he said, "Is there anyone among you (is there any father) who, if your child asks for bread, will give that child a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake. If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts

to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him."

It is evident that Jesus' experience of God as Father was not the fearsome, frightened, terror-filled experience that sometimes is portrayed in movies and stories of the relationship of sons and daughters with obsessive, autocratic, domineering, abusive fathers. Jesus spoke of God as "ABBA," a loving Creator. His concept of God as a Father was that of being affirmed; a God who said, "You are my son and I am 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 empty, he would go apart so that he could be in communion with God. The wisdom, the insight, the direction, the inspiration in his life came from God as his Father.

In the same way as Jesus, each one of you hearing this sermon has two fathers or maybe more. You probably 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's difficult to talk about God without using metaphors such as

"Father," or "Shepherd," or "Mother," or "Lord," such as "The Lord is my shepherd." The New Testament in the Bible uses the metaphor of God as Father 150 times and always in a very personal sense.

You also have a biological father. Some of you have a stepfather, or an adoptive father, a father-in-law, a grandfather and maybe a great-grandfather. You could also have other men who have filled a "father" role in your life—a scoutmaster, a teacher, a coach, an uncle, a friend, a mentor. Many of you are fathers of your own children and you are a father figure to others.

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."

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What are some of the lessons Jesus learned from his father, Joseph? The gospel stories in the New Testament do not give us a wealth of information about Joseph. Here's what we know. Matthew's gospel traces the family tree of Joseph forty one generations back to King David and including Jesus, 42 generations. In other words, the early church considered Jesus to be the son of Joseph and therefore a descendent 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 you to Joseph, he is described as being a man to whom Mary is engaged. Matthew adds to this information by telling you that when Joseph discovered Mary was pregnant and he knew he wasn't the biological father, he considered breaking the engagement. As he was contemplating this decision, he had a dream in which God told him through an angel messenger, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child she is carrying is a very special one." He listened to God and took Mary as his wife. Six or seven months later, Jesus was born.

Later, after the visit of the Wise Men, Joseph had another dream in which he was told to take the child and his mother to Egypt, to save the baby's life. After a 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 occupation as a carpenter.

You hear nothing more about Joseph in the gospel stories 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. Joseph and Mary returned to the city and found him in the Temple where he was having a religious discussion with revered teachers.

After that, Joseph disappears from the pages of the Bible. Some Biblical scholars believe Joseph died while Jesus was still a young man. As the first-born son in the family, Jesus became the head of the house and filled that role until his sisters and brothers were raised.

If that is true, then he filled the role of father in the family for a time.

What did Jesus learn from Joseph? It's only speculation but I believe he learned to be a good carpenter. He learned how to build strong and sturdy homes and furniture. He learned how to keep his tools sharp and clean. He also learned much about God from Joseph. That's why the metaphor of God as Father meant so much to him.

He learned from his dad to "do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with God."

In the gospel stories, Joseph is described a "just man." When he discovered that Mary was pregnant and he knew he wasn't the father, he did not want to embarrass her. 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 he was a kind, caring man with a strong sense of compassion and justice. He did not panic and take hasty action. He was a man of deep religious faith, a mystic. He was not afraid to pay attention to his dreams and visions. He was open to letting God guide him.

What did I learn from my dad? Like Joseph, some very practical things. As I've mentioned in previous sermons, he taught me to, "always park in the shade. Take good care of the farm machinery. Keep your tools clean and sharp. Never abuse the farm animals in any way."

I also learned from my dad to have respect for my wife and for all women. He had a deep respect for my mother and for all women. My four sisters would testify to that. We never witnessed any physical or verbal abuse between them or toward us. They worked out their disagreements by talking them through.

I learned from my dad not to be afraid to ask questions. When he had doubts about the Christian faith, he was open to new knowledge. Although he never went to high school because he had to begin work at an early age, he wanted all of his six living children to have a college education and he was proud of us for doing so.

I learned from my dad that to make a moral choice means taking a risk, even it means losing status where you live and work. He gave me the freedom to take risks, to make mistakes and to learn from them.

I learned from my dad the importance of regular participation in worship. He was a regular attender,

along with my mother and all of his children at church worship services and he was proud of me for becoming an ordained minister. He encouraged each one of his children to follow their dream.

I also learned from my dad the importance of having a good work ethic. We frequently worked long days on our small farm. I learned how to drive a tractor at age 11, how to drive the farm truck and how to drive a team of horses to cut and rake hay and plant corn. I learned from my dad how to split wood for the kitchen cook stove, how to build a fire in the furnace, how to shock wheat and to husk corn. I learned from him how to fix things.

My brother and I took our bicycles apart and put

them back together again. We built our first bicycle by using the parts of an old tricycle.

At the same time, I learned from my dad how to have fun, enjoy life and appreciate all kinds of music. When I was a young boy, my dad and his brothers and one brother-in-law had a dance band. This band played for public dances and wedding celebrations two or three nights every weekend. As a family we attended many of those dances and saw first-hand the joy they experienced making music. I and my siblings all learned how to play a musical instrument. All of us played in the high school band. We sang in the church choir and the high school musical groups.

I could tell you many more things I learned from my dad but my purpose is to help you recall what you learned from your father and from other men who filled the role of father in your life.

In addition, if you are a father, you need to consider what your children are learning from you and what you hope they will learn and remember. Even though your fatherhood is at best a dim reflection of the fatherhood of God, it is often the basis from which your children begin to understand the love of God.

One way in which you can honor your father is to remember some of what you learned from him that has been helpful to you. Another way to honor your

father is by being a good father to your children and to those people who think of you as a father. You honor God in this way.

What else does it mean to honor your father? It is not to become him but to become your true self. You need to free yourself from your parents to become a fully formed individual. Even the best parents have a power over you that needs to be broken. Your life in the end must replace that of your parents. The commandment to honor your father and your mother is a commandment to honor yourself, honor the life-force that created you, the good and the bad mingled within you, but not to honor abuse. You cannot undo abuse but you can find a way to honor life, even the life of an abusive

father, by turning that abuse into compassion not only for yourself which is necessary for healing, but more important for all who suffer.

Remember, your parents, for better or worse have helped to shape your life. So on this Father's Day weekend, I ask you to remember all those men who have been a father to you and also God as your father. And if you are a father, then ask, "what are my children learning from me? Does it add or detract from the understanding of God as being like a loving father? Amen.