

“WHAT’S A FATHER TO DO?”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
June 16, 2013

Father’s Day

Acts 11:19-26

Matthew 10:5-23

Last month, on May 12th to be exact, we celebrated Mother’s Day. I don’t know if you were here or not, but on that day, I preached about mothers, and the joys and struggles of motherhood. Many people made good comments to me about that sermon, but I have to say that more than one man coming down the steps to shake my hand asked if men would get equal time on Father’s Day. Well, the answer to that is “Yes!” Today’s your day.

So I begin with two little stories about fathers.

One is the story of a father of a six month old. He and his wife were home one night, having just an ordinary night, and they decided to make sandwiches for dinner. They each made their own sandwich. And what a sandwich the father made! Here’s how he described it:

“As ham sandwiches go, it was perfection. A thick slab of ham, a fresh bun, crisp lettuce and plenty of expensive, light brown, gourmet mustard. The corners of my jaw were aching in anticipation. I carried it to the picnic table in our backyard, picked it up with both hands but was stopped by my wife suddenly at my side. ‘Hold Johnny (our six week old son, he explains) while I get my sandwich,’” she said.

I had him balanced between my left elbow and shoulder and was reaching again for the ham sandwich when I noticed a streak of mustard on my fingers. I love mustard. And I had no napkin. So I licked it off.

It was NOT mustard. No man ever put a baby down faster. It was the first and only time I have sprinted with my tongue protruding. With a washcloth in each hand I did the sort of routine shoeshine guys do, only I did it on my tongue.

Later my wife said, ‘Now you know why they call that mustard Poupon!’”

(On-line, Steve Malone)

Sometimes being a father is tough work! And if you think that was tough, listen to this – it’s from the father of a teenage boy.

This father was walking by his son’s room and noticed that it was clean and the bed was made. Rather than being happy about it, the father was strangely suspicious, and it turns out, rightly so. Sitting on the pillow was an envelope with

the word “Dad” written on it. With no small amount of trepidation, the man opened the envelope, took out the note and read it. This is what it said:

Dear Dad, it is with great regret and sorrow that I’m writing you. I had to elope with my girlfriend because I wanted to avoid a scene with Mom and you. Stacie and I really love each other, but I knew you would not approve of her because of all her piercings, tattoos, tight motorcycle clothes and the fact that she is much older than I am. But it’s not just that – Dad, she’s pregnant. But I know we’ll be really happy. Stacie has a trailer in the woods where we’ll be able to live. She’s a free spirit and she has opened my eyes to the fact that marijuana doesn’t really hurt anyone. We’ll be growing it for ourselves and trading it with other people who live nearby. Don’t worry, Dad. I’m 15 and I know how to take care of myself. Someday I’m sure that we will be back to visit so that you can get to know your grandchildren. Love, Your Son John

P.S. Dad, none of the above is true. I’m over at Tommy’s house. I just wanted to remind you that there are worse things in life than the report card that’s in my center desk drawer. I love you. Call me when it’s safe to come home.

(On-line, CandlePowerForums)

Wow! Fatherhood is not for the feint of heart! Just like I said on Mother’s Day, being a father is a wonderful mixture of joys and struggles, ups and downs, togetherness and separation, roots and wings.

Fathers are wonderful gifts from God, and this morning, I want us to begin this time together thinking about fathers, in one of the same ways we looked at mothers. Though the words of the late, wonderful writer Erma Bombeck.

Here’s how she talked about fathers:

“When the good Lord was creating fathers he started with a tall frame. And a female angel nearby said, ‘What kind of father is that? If you’re going to make children so close to the ground, why have you put fathers up so high? He won’t be able to shoot marbles without kneeling, tuck a child in bed without bending, or even kiss a child without a lot of stooping.’ And God smiled and said, ‘Yes, but if I make him child-size, who would children have to look up to?’

And when God made a father’s hands, they were large and sinewy. And the angel shook her head sadly and said, ‘Do you know what you’re doing? Large hands are clumsy. They can’t manage diaper pins, small buttons, rubber bands on pony tails or even remove splinters caused by baseball bats.’ And God smiled and said, ‘I know, but they’re large enough to hold everything a small boy empties from his pockets at the end of the day . . . yet small enough to cup a child’s face in his hands.’

And then God molded long, slim legs and broad shoulders. And the angel nearly had a heart attack. ‘Boy, this is the end of the week, all right,’ she clucked. ‘Do you realize you just made a father without a lap? How is he going to pull a child

close to him without the kid falling between his legs!’ And God smiled and said, ‘A mother needs a lap. A father needs strong shoulders to pull a sled, balance a boy on a bicycle, and hold a sleepy head on the way home from the circus.’

God was in the middle of creating two of the largest feet anyone had ever seen when the angel could contain herself no longer. ‘That’s not fair. Do you honestly think those large boats are going to dig out of bed early in the morning when the baby cries? Or walk through a small birthday party without crushing at least three of the guests?’ And God smiled and said, ‘They’ll work. You’ll see. They’ll support a small child who wants to ride a horse, or scare off mice at the summer cabin, or display shoes that will be a challenge to fill.’

God worked throughout the night, giving the father few words, but a firm authoritative voice; eyes that saw everything, but remained calm and tolerant. Finally, almost as an afterthought, he added tears. Then he turned to the angel and said, ‘Now, are you satisfied that he can love as much as a mother?’ The angel shutteth up!

(On-line, Sermonillustrations.com)

As I said earlier, fathers are a wonderful gift from God. And they have been entrusted with a wonderful and awesome responsibility – loving children and guiding them as they grow. They do that in so many ways, but today, I just want to talk about three of them – guiding them by example, guiding them by helping them understand the realities of life, and guiding them by encouragement.

First – fathers guide their children by example – and that can be for good or ill. I read a poem a long time ago that really stuck with me. It was called “Little Eyes Upon You,” and it talks about how children are always watching their parents. It goes like this:

There are little eyes upon you and they’re watching night and day.

There are little ears that quickly take in every word you say.

There are little hands all eager to do anything you do;

And a little boy who’s dreaming of the day he’ll be like you.

You’re the little fellow’s idol, you’re the wisest of the wise.

In his little mind about you no suspicions ever rise.

He believes in you devoutly, holds all you say and do;

He will say and do, in your way when he’s grown up just like you.

There’s a wide-eyed little fellow who believes you’re always right;

And his eyes are always opened, and he watches day and night.
You are setting an example every day in all you do;
For the little boy who's waiting to grow up to be like you.

(A Second Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul)

That poem says it so well. Fathers lead by example. Their children watch them and see how they live, what they say, how they make decisions, whether they are fair or unfair, what's important to them, how they choose to spend their time and money. They watch them, and as they do, they see if what they profess to believe, or better yet, the One, Jesus in whom they believe, is reflected in their words, their actions, and their decisions. Children watch all the time, and they learn from how their fathers live.

A man once took his two young sons to play miniature golf. He walked up to the ticket counter, and asked, "How much is it to get in?" The young man replied, "\$3.00 for you and \$3.00 for any kid older than six. We let them in free if they are six or younger. How old are they?"

The father said, "One of them is three and the other is seven, so I guess I owe you \$6.00." The man at the ticket counter said, "Hey mister, did you just win the lottery or something? You could have saved yourself three bucks. You could have told me the older one was six; I wouldn't have known the difference."

But the dad said, "Yes, that may be true, but my kids would have."

(Chicken Soup for the Soul)

Now, there's a man who knows "little eyes are watching him: and he needs to set a good example, if he wants his kids to grow up to be honest, ethical, godly men. May it be that all fathers do the same.

Secondly, fathers help their children to understand and withstand the realities of life. Do you remember what Jesus said to those with whom he was talking in this morning's Gospel lesson? He was telling them about all the pitfalls they might encounter in life. How if they encountered opposition, which they surely would, that they should "shake the dust off their feet and move on"?

Part of being a father is helping to prepare your child for the reality of life in the world – that it's not always going to be a bed of roses, but they can get through it – and then being there with them with the times do get tough, supporting them through it all. Reminding them that things won't always go their way, that sometimes they will get rejected by friends, or relationships, or colleges they want to attend. But also reminding them that strength and growth comes from going through those things and enduring them, and reminding them that they never go through them alone - that God will always be by their side.

The great preacher and teacher Tony Campolo wanted his children to know those things about life. He was actually concerned that they were living too privileged a life. He was making a very good living on the preaching circuit around the world, they lived in a very nice home in a very nice, safe neighborhood, and Tony was afraid that his kids weren't learning about the realities that life might throw their way. So he took them on mission trips with him to third world countries. He wanted them to see how so many of the people of the world live – in poverty, struggling to make ends meet. He also wanted them to see that many of those people are the most joy-filled Christians around – they praise God with a joy rarely seen in most churches in America! Tony says that his children were never the same after they visited those countries. It was the best way he could teach them about the realities of life, about what really matters, and about how to handle it when things are tough. That's what fathers do!

Finally, one of the greatest things fathers can do is be encouragers for their children. That's why we read the lesson about Barnabas this morning – because Barnabas is known as “the great encourager.” His whole life and mission was to lift others up and support them.

That's what fathers are called to do as well – be a source of encouragement for their children. In so many ways, it's a tough world for kids these days. If you read the newspaper or watch TV, you know that bullying is rampant these days. And even if your child isn't being bullied, there's always that kind of competition going on – who's dating whom, who's got the best clothes, drives the best car, who's the smartest, has the best looking boyfriend or girlfriend. Young people are so vulnerable to being crushed by comments or being excluded by others.

They need someone on their side, always – and that someone that we remember today is their father. Kids need to know that their Dad is always there for them, their number one fan. And even more, once again, they need their Dads to remind them that their Heavenly Father is always there as well.

Do you ever remember hearing about the Father's Day event that was held at an elementary school, where a bunch of kids were standing around talking about their dads? Dads had been invited to come speak to the class. One kid said that his dad couldn't be there, because he was a surgeon, and he was very busy saving lives. Another kid boasted that her dad was a banker, and he didn't have time to come because he was busy helping people buy houses. And another kid said his dad was a lawyer and he couldn't come, because he was gone from dusk til dawn helping people who were in trouble. Well, it went on and on, kid after kid boasting “my dad is this and my dad is that,” until one little boy piped up and said, “My dad is here.”

Nothing was more encouraging for that child than having his dad take time out of his schedule to come to his classroom. Now, I know that's not always possible, but there are a million ways for fathers to encourage their children. The challenge is always to remember how much they need it – and they need it from you.

I can't say it enough. Fathers are a wonderful gift from God. Our Lord Jesus was blessed with two fathers – His Heavenly Father, and the one God gave him on this earth – Joseph. Joseph, who no doubt, showed Jesus by the example of his life how to be a man of faith and integrity; who helped him weather the ups and downs of the realities of life, so that when those realities hit him – those harsh realities that took him to the cross – He knew how to handle it; and who encouraged him to be the man God created Him to be.

So for Joseph, and all of the other fathers created by the hand of God, we give Him thanks and praise – and we pray for them all as they face the wonderful, but awesome tasks of fatherhood every single day.

Amen.