

Blessings of the Father

Genesis 27: 1-27a, 30-38, & 41a (Jacob steals Esau's blessing from Isaac)

Galatians 3: 23-29 (You are the children of God)

Matthew 1: 18-25 (Joseph adopts Jesus as his son)

How many of you have a good memory? How many have an OK memory? How many of you can't remember if your memory is any good? You know they say there are 3 signs of aging—the first is you start to lose your memory; the second is...I can't remember the second....

Well, apparently I'm in luck this morning, because it would take a very good memory to recall that I gave a sermon here at Asbury with this exact same title 13 years ago on Father's Day. It was a poignant time. My son Nick had just graduated from high school and in fact he was the Liturgist that morning. But it was also poignant for another reason—our long-time pastor, Rev. John Price, had recently passed away, and we had lost a man who was certainly thought to be the "father" of our small congregation. But I will come back to that later.

While this is Father's Day, and it is appropriate to celebrate the father in us all, I don't in any way want this to be seen as a slight to mothering. For one thing, mothers had their day last month, and it is always appropriate to acknowledge "Ladies before Gentlemen"! But there is a danger that Christianity itself can seem to slight mothers. After all, we talk of God *the Father*, and while Mary is in there somewhere, she certainly is not right up there with God. But any of you who sit near me in church will know that when we say the Lord's Prayer together aloud, I always say "Our Father *and Mother* who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..." Because I think it is important to remember that God embodies traits of mothering as well as fathering. After all, according to both Matthew (23:37) and Luke (13:34) Jesus confesses "How often have I desired to gather [my] children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings!" And in the Old Testament Isaiah (66:13) prophesies: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you." So I think we have to remember that God embodies aspects of both mothering and fathering.

But still and all, today is the day to celebrate fathers, and the fathering that we do. And being in church here, as we are, it is natural to turn to the Bible for guidance. The Bible is sometimes presented as God's how-to guide to life. Surely, then, it could serve as the instruction manual for fathers. Of course there are pious instructions to children, like the 5th commandment: "Honor your father and your mother." But what we are looking for here is the reverse—instructions for fathers. So we find things like this:

Proverb 22: 6—"Give a young man training suitable to his character."

Well, that's vague enough as to be not very helpful—except that it does remind us that kids are different, and shouldn't all be handled in just the same way.

Proverb 29: 17—“Correct your son and he will give you peace of mind; he will delight your soul.”

Now, I like the sentiment here—I’m one of those old-fashioned parents who thinks that parents these days are too ready to accommodate their kids’ whims. But while correcting your son may *ultimately* give you peace of mind, I’ll also admit that it might take a while!

Proverb 13: 24—“Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.”

“Spare the rod and spoil the child”—how many of you heard that from a parent or a grandparent in your youth? Didn’t they always say it’s in the Bible? Well, it’s not. In fact it’s a 17th century proverb, presumably based on this passage. But in its original context it was actually part of a humorous poem in which it was meant as an off-color metaphor for birth control. In any case, this is not a piece of advice we are likely to accept anymore.

Proverb 19: 18—“Discipline your son while there is still hope; but do not get so angry as to kill him.”

Now there’s something I hope we can all agree with!

Proverb 23: 13-14—“Do not hold back discipline from the child, a stroke from the rod is not likely to be fatal. Give him a stroke from the rod, you will save his soul from hell.”

This, again, goes a bit far, and I don’t think I want to rely on the assurance that it’s “not likely” to be fatal. I don’t think that will hold up in a court of law.

Isaiah 38: 19—“Fathers, tell your sons about God’s constancy.”

I think I can go with that.

Ephesians 6: 4—“Fathers, never drive your children to resentment but bring them up with correction and advice inspired by the Lord.”

Colossians 3: 21—“Fathers, do not irritate your children or they will lose heart.”

These last two seem to go together, and again I agree with them, though they are vague enough that it is hard to judge when you are pushing too far with discipline.

So, we find a sort of mixed bag here. Some insightful rules of thumb; but others that seem outmoded. Still, it’s a start.

But when we turn from principles to practice, we get a rather different picture. In fact, when we turn to the stories of actual families in the Bible, it is not pretty! If anything, the stories of families in the Bible are closer to a how-NOT-to manual for parenting!

I could give you lots of examples—you can probably think of some for yourselves! But, just to focus on one issue—that of preference for one child, or rejection of another. How many of you grew up with sisters or brothers? With smaller families it may be less of a problem now; who knows. But it was certainly a problem back in Old Testament times. Consider these cases that span the book of Genesis, in which sibling rivalry is either created, or exacerbated, or ignored and so not effectively addressed by fathers:

-Cain and Abel—in which Cain kills Abel out of jealousy.

-Noah, who played favorites among his sons after the flood.

-Isaac and Ishmael—in which their father Abraham (at the behest of Sarah and of God!) sends Ishmael and his mother Hagar out into the desert, presumably to die, as a way of securing Isaac's birthright. Then Abraham, again at the behest of God, nearly kills his son Isaac as a sign of his own faithfulness. We don't hear the aftermath of this episode, but there is no evidence that Abraham and Isaac ever spoke again, and it seems to me that Isaac suffers from something like PTSD in his dealings with his own sons, as we hear recounted in our Old Testament reading this morning.

-Jacob and Esau—in which Isaac's sons are in a constant battle, and Jacob, with the advice of his mother, manages to cheat Esau out of his birthright. Upon realizing this Esau cries out to Isaac, "Father, bless me too...Can you bless only once, father?" to which Isaac was only silent. Esau vows to kill his brother.

-Culminating in Joseph and his brothers, who are sons of this scoundrel, Jacob. Jacob plays favorites by preferring Joseph, and his brothers then scheme to sell him into slavery while making it look as though wild animals had eaten him!

-This whole storyline, from Abraham all the way to Joseph and his brothers, a matter of four generations (they are Abraham's great-grandsons), puts me in mind of God's vow (Exodus 34:7 & Numbers 14:18) to "visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

The storyline of Genesis comes out sounding more like a reality TV show than like a guide to life. But perhaps we can even learn from that. For we often see here, if not what *should* happen, at least what *does* happen, when fathers and brothers act in certain ways. And that can be useful information. When we hear that the sins of the father will be visited upon the later generations, I don't think we should hear that as a promise or a threat from God. That would be disheartening. But I think we can hear it as a description of reality—how a father treats a child can be so destructive that the child in turn is damaged to the extent of re-enacting that same abuse upon

their own children—as so on...unto the third and the fourth generations. That’s how hard it can be to end abuse and heal relationships.

Actually the news of these stories is not *all* bad news. If we dig deeper we sometimes find instances of reconciliation and healing—between Jacob and Esau, and then between Joseph and his brothers—based on forgiveness. Jacob eventually offers an apology for his wrongdoing, which Esau forgave. Joseph, on the other hand, is magnanimous in forgiving his brothers before they even recognize him. So these can ultimately be seen as stories of how God works through our lives to love and redeem us after all. But the stories are in no way guides to good fathering.

And unfortunately I don’t see how the Biblical principles we sketched earlier could have helped much. In Biblical times there was a clear practice of primogeniture, in which inheritance went to the first-born son. So treating children equally, a hallmark of our own child-rearing attitudes, is not a recognized value then. It seems to me that much of the family conflict in the stories I’ve recounted comes from fathers who are unable to love their children well and equally. Even if the fathers don’t create the problems, they manage to exacerbate them, or they do little to mitigate them.

I have recounted the sins of the fathers in some Biblical stories. Let us now take a moment to think about the fathering we have experienced in our lives. Some of us were fathered well. Some of us were not. We thank God for fathers who loved us well.

For those fathers who did not love well, we search, first, for understanding. We know they may have struggled with the iniquity of older generations—perhaps they were acting out abuse that they themselves received. We try to accept that fathers who struggled to love well were doing the best that they could. We search, second, for the ability to forgive. Just as Jacob and Esau were able to reconcile through forgiveness, and Joseph and his brothers were able to reconcile through forgiveness, so we search for forgiveness. Many of our fathers are no longer alive. God rest their souls. Perhaps reconciliation is no longer possible. But forgiveness is. It may not be easy, and we may not be there yet, but we ask for the ability to forgive them when they did not love well, just as many Biblical fathers did not love well.

Now, where can we turn to in the Bible to find *good* fathering? One obvious example is Jesus and his father Joseph. We hear a bit about their relationship in the Gospel passage this morning, as Joseph is told by an angel to name the baby “Jesus.” “When Joseph woke from the dream he did what the angel had told him to do...and he named him Jesus” (Matthew 1: 24-25). By naming the baby, Joseph accepts it as his own. After that we get only snippets of their relationship, but we know that Joseph, himself a carpenter, raised Jesus to follow in that trade as well (Matthew 13: 55 & Mark 6: 3). This made Jesus self-sufficient, which is one thing we all wish for our children! Jesus didn’t have to come back home after college...and live in the basement.

In this respect, Joseph raised his son to be like himself. But that isn’t always the best course. My father was a truck mechanic who read rather little and had no interest in sports. My brother is a truck mechanic and is like my father in many ways. When it came to me, however, I think my father was somewhat at a loss—I read a lot, loved sports, and had no mechanical abilities. It is to his credit that he

didn't try to make me like him, and in fact we could see him as following the Biblical injunction from Proverbs (22: 6) to give me training suitable to my character. At any rate, he let me go my own way, and didn't try to fit my square peg into his round hole.

In a different Biblical story, from the Old Testament (1 Samuel 3), Samuel is a young man who has been dedicated to the Temple and is raised by a priest named Eli. Eli had serious problems with his own sons, but he seems to make up for that in his fatherly relationship with Samuel. When Samuel hears a voice at night calling his name, he keeps supposing that it is Eli calling him. But Eli realizes that it is God calling him, and urges Samuel to listen to that call from God. He doesn't try to make Samuel like himself, but to listen to the voice that calls him in a very different direction.

This is a Biblical model that we would do well to follow—helping our children to listen for their own voice, even if we do not hear or cannot understand that voice ourselves.

Let us now think back on our own experience of our fathers—were we fathered in the way we wanted to be? Some of us were. Perhaps some of us were not. We confess that we sometimes wanted to be fathered differently from what our fathers were able to offer us. Help us to understand and forgive them.

But let us turn now from reflections on being fathered, to reflections on being fathers. Lord, help us to think about how we can father others by helping them to hear their own voice, and not trying to drown that voice out with our own.

This last week began with an enormous tragedy early Sunday morning, when 50 people were killed in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. I want to reflect on this painful event.

I have been to three different memorial gatherings this week, in each of which gay, lesbian and transgender people along with their allies; Christian, Muslim, Jewish and non-religious people all shared their fears and hopes about life and death. At one of these events, Monday evening, a young woman named Lisa said that she had been at a wedding ceremony on Saturday of two of her friends. At the wedding reception she described how a father stood to offer a toast to the couple. He expressed how much he and his wife had learned from their daughter about love and commitment and courage, and how much they loved and believed in their daughter and her commitment to her wife. As Lisa told this story her voice was halting and she had to pause before she went on—she told us she thought to herself “Why couldn't he be my father?” It was heartbreaking to hear. In my head I could hear Esau's cry to Isaac: “Father, bless me too.” And at Isaac's silence, Esau began to weep aloud.

Lisa's own father had failed her profoundly. Presumably he could only hear his own voice, and wanted to drown out any voice that Lisa heard. And worse, he apparently didn't comprehend the damage that that caused her. Lisa needed a father. How important it is to father our children by helping them to hear their own voice—a voice that may, like Samuel's, come from God. We pray for wisdom and strength as fathers—to bless children in ways that help them to grow into their own images—not ours—as hard as that may be.

Even a week after the massacre in Orlando, the motivations of the shooter, Omar Mateen, are not completely clear. But the more I hear, the more tragic the story becomes. Some have wanted to paint it as one more example of an ISIS-inspired Muslim extremist harming America. Apparently Mateen did proclaim some sort of pledge to ISIS during the attack. His father says, however, that Mateen had been deeply bothered by seeing men kissing, and by his family seeing men kissing, and that this had made him angry with the gay community. We also learned that Mateen was abusive with his own family and psychologically troubled. But if these dynamics are not tangled enough, we have now learned that Mateen had visited the Pulse Club a number of times before and had met people there through a gay dating app. If Mateen was motivated by hatred, it now seems to have been the worst and most tragic kind—self-hatred.

Mateen's father's account of his son now sounds like his own attempt to reinforce the idea that his religion, in this case Islam, opposes a gay lifestyle and that Mateen was primarily motivated by a commitment to that religious prohibition. This is no place to try to understand Islam's relationship to homosexuality, except to say that Christianity's relationship is equally tangled. I imagine that Mateen, with the reinforcement of his father, internalized a supposed Muslim hatred of homosexuality, and that this voice threatened to drown out any other voice within Mateen. Yet it seems that there may have been a small voice in Mateen that spoke otherwise. Mateen's violence was not only an attempt to destroy a gay community, but also an attempt to destroy a voice within himself that he could not quiet in any other way, and could not bear to hear.

This is conjecture on my part, but to me it explains his search for a cause, such as ISIS, that might justify his hatred and violence, and his urgent need to ultimately snuff out that voice within himself. God rest his tormented soul.

None of this excuses the slaughter that occurred in Orlando. But it is not an unfamiliar dynamic. How many gay and transgender youth commit suicide because of a hopelessness brought on by self-hatred? Statistics are hard to come by, but I'll bet it's more than 50 a year. Thank God these forsaken youth rarely turn their hatred on others, as happened in this case. God rest their souls.

But consider the case of some conservative pastors who are secretly gay and who express their self-hatred by shaming the so-called sins of homosexuality from the pulpit. And consider the case of some conservative legislators who are secretly gay and who express their self-hatred by voting against anti-discrimination laws, opposing hate-crime bills, and supporting "Defense-of-Marriage" acts. How much damage have they done?

How much responsibility do Christian churches bear for their role in trying to shout down that voice inside some people? What could Christian churches—what could our church—do to respect, protect, and encourage those who hear a different voice from our own?

At another gathering this week an 83-year-old woman spoke as an ally, and of her need to be able to *do* something. She despaired of having witnessed so many tragic massacres, and having seen nothing done to prevent the next one. She was, as she said, "probably on the way out," as someone so old. But if only there were something positive she could do.

Notice that the two positive stories I have related of fatherhood from the Bible—Joseph and Eli—were both cases of “foster” fathers. In neither case were the men the biological fathers. It is so important to know that we all can be fathers, in various ways and to various degrees. While we probably cannot undo all the damage that a misguided biological father can do, we can all offer something. We can find ways to help others find and hear their own voice; we can help them to feel loved and secure. That is the job of a father, but in another way it is the job of us all.

In fact, the church is a good place for that to happen. All of you have heard Rhonda address you at the beginning of the service with the greeting “When you come to Asbury, you are family.” But you may not all know where that line comes from. It comes from our late pastor, Rev. John Price.

Rev. Price began his ministry in 1957 with churches in southwest Virginia and in eastern Tennessee. He and his wife had only one child, who was killed in 1978. In trying to deal with that loss, Rev. Price left the ministry for several years and worked in business. But in 1982 he decided to return to the ministry, and he was assigned to Asbury United Methodist. When asked, later in life, why he had returned, he said that the loss of their son had left a hole in his life, and “In a way, I think Asbury became kind of a substitute.” He was thought of as the father of our congregation, and it seems he sought not only to be father *to* the congregation, but also to be loved as a father *by* the congregation. He added, “Particularly when you think of the kind of love we lavished on an only child. My wife and I needed some of that returned to us.” Rev. Price served at Asbury from 1982-1988 and again from 1996-2003, when he passed away on April 30th.

I was blessed to know Rev. Price beginning in 1996, when he was President of the local NAACP and I was on the School Board, and then more intimately starting in 2000, when I began attending Asbury. My son Nick and I joined Asbury in 2001 because Rev. Price welcomed us in. He made us feel like family.

Those of us who knew Rev. Price think back on those good old days. But the model he left for us is as good now as it was then. How can we now help others to hear and respond to that still small voice within them? How can we help make people feel safe and secure and courageous in a dangerous world? And that goes not only for others in our own congregation. How can we as a congregation reach outward to those who need fathering—at the Juvenile Detention Center, in the local schools, at the Rosa Peters Playground, in the NAACP Youth Council, in the local jail or the regional prison? How can we be the church?

Because being the church is helping all God’s children to be family once more. For as Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians (3: 26): “All of you are children of God through Christ Jesus.” All those 49 people in Orlando are children of God. Omar Mateen is a child of God. What can we do to help the children of God rest in the comfort of the family of God?

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