

FATHERLY ADVICE

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Mark Hostetter

June 21, 2009

Father's Day

Scripture: Mark 4: 35-41; II Corinthians 6: 1-13

Good morning! It's great to be home, here at First Presbyterian on this Father's Day, with my girls, my family, my friends, and it's truly wonderful to be speaking with you from this oh-so-high pulpit.

On this Father's Day, the two common lectionary readings we heard earlier seem particularly appropriate. Although Paul's letter in 2nd Corinthians chapter 6 was a description of the early Christians, doesn't it sound a bit like a description of fathers?

In great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses;
in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger;
in understanding, patience and kindness;
in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love;
in truthful speech and in the power of God;
through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report;
genuine; known –
dying, yet we live on; beaten, yet not killed;
sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;
poor, yet making many rich;
having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

Sounds to me like a father.

And what father wouldn't like the power seen in chapter 4 of Mark's gospel, where all a father would have to do is say, "Peace. Be still," and it would be so. I don't know about your experience, but that's not the case in my house.

In his Father's Day message, President Obama spoke of his own experience growing up without a father. And he focused on three things we need to do as fathers: First -- to instill an ethic of excellence in our children; to dream without limit and reach for those goals; to challenge the glorification of violence in the movies and TV by giving glory in our homes to achievement, self respect, and hard work.

The second thing we need to do as fathers, he said, is to pass along the value of empathy to our children. Not sympathy, but the ability to stand in someone else's shoes, to look at the world through their eyes, to shift from a "me first" perspective to loving our neighbor as ourselves.

And finally, to think about what we are leaving our children. That life doesn't count for much unless we're willing to do our small part to leave our children a better world. Even if it's difficult, and even if we don't get very far in our lifetime, we try, and we hope, and we have faith that when the winds come, and the rains fall, and they beat upon the house we have built, we keep faith that our heavenly Father will be there to support us, and protect us, and lead His children through the darkest of storms into the light of a better day.

Father's Day was officially recognized by Congress in 1956, and things father-related have changed a lot since then. A just-released book "Make Room for Daddy," by Judith Leavitt,¹ talks about one aspect of that change – what fathers actually did over the last 80 years while mothers were giving birth.

Fathers today are steeped in the fine points of birth coaching and Lamaze, huffing and puffing along with their partner, cutting the umbilical cord, videotaping, but once upon a time they had literally nothing to do with the event other than participating in the kickoff nine months earlier. And it's probably a good thing that fathers aren't any longer just biding their time in the waiting room with cigars.

A recent article on Baby Boomer sons and their fathers² shined some light on the "Father Knows Best" authority of boomer dads. Fathers did the talking, children did the listening. There never was a question of Dad's love and that he would do anything to help and support. Yet dad's love was an authoritative love that clearly implied he pretty much always knew what was best. Even when we knew that mothers maybe knew best more often than dads.

Pro golfer Kenny Perry tells the story of his dad who calls every night and gives a critique of every round of golf that he has watched on television, every club elected. Good boomer-son Kenny would never consider telling dad that he has no idea what he is talking about, no clue about the pressures of a pro tour. "Good point, Dad. You're absolutely right. And thanks for all your love and support."

And his dad replies, "I'm glad you see it my way. Good luck tomorrow. And just know that your mother and I love you and are rooting for you."

Isn't that really the bottom line, all we really need to hear, to know how blessed we are to have parents who care so much, to root us on, in good times and in bad.

Another important role of fathers is their apparent fearless courage that dads personify for their kids. Now they don't have a monopoly on it, but fathers have long been seen as risk-takers – the ones who throw us delighted toddlers high up in the air, who launch us off without training wheels for the first time, who push our swings higher than we ever thought possible.

Risk-taking is important.

Some of those risk-takers were in full attendance at the recent "Big Tent" gathering in Atlanta in this off-year between biennial General Assemblies. Two thousand Presbyterians, without any business to conduct, focused on why they love the church, what the church need to be doing to embody Christ's love, and why we're all Presbyterians.

The World War Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X-ers, Millennials; Red and Blue; Progressives and Conservatives; Presbyterians coming together. Loving their church, refusing to accept old prejudices, determined to carry the torch of authentic witness, social outreach, missional service – it was a vision of an emergent, missional, multicultural church. Presbyterians at their best. And a hope for the future.

Risk opens the door to failure, yes. But it's only risk that opens the door to possibilities.

And so, on this Father's Day, I'm going to take a bit of a risk myself -- a different thing for Old First Presbyterian Church. Fathers tend to like practical, visual, simple examples anyway. And since it's Father's Day, with so many fathers and children sitting here, I'm going to take my final few minutes and share a quick Father's Day Children's Sermon.

So it would be great if all the kids in the congregation could join me at the foot of the steps up here at the front of the sanctuary.

* * *

When things in your life seem almost too much to handle, when 24 hours in a day aren't enough to fit in all the things you want to do, remember this story – the story of the beaker.

A teacher, a professor, stood before his Philosophy class and had some items in front of him. When the class began, he picked up a very large and empty beaker and proceeded to fill it with billiard balls, from a pool table. Like this

He then asked the students if the jar was full. They agreed that it was.

The professor then picked up a container of marbles and poured them into the jar. He shook the jar lightly. The marbles rolled into the open areas between the billiard balls. He then asked the students again if the jar was full. They agreed it was.

The professor next picked up a container of sand and poured it into the jar. Of course, the sand filled up everything else. He asked once more if the jar was full. The students responded with a unanimous 'yes.'

The professor then produced two bottles of iced tea from under the table and poured the iced tea into the jar, filling the empty space between the sand.

“Now,” said the professor, “I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life.”

The billiard balls are the important things — your family, your children, your faith, your health, your friends and your favorite passions — and if everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full. Just like the beaker.

The marbles are the other things that matter, like your job, your house and your car.

The sand is everything else — the small stuff. But if you put the sand into the jar first, there is no room for the marbles or the billiard balls.

The same goes for life. If you spend all your time and energy on the small stuff you will never have room for the things that are important to you.

Pay attention to the things that are critical to your happiness. Spend time with your children. Spend time with your parents. Visit with grandparents.

Draw close to God. Pray.

Take time to get medical checkups. Take your spouse out to dinner. Practice "romance" as often as possible. There will always be time to clean the house and fix the disposal.

Take care of the things that really matter. Set your priorities. The rest is just sand.

Then one of the students raised her hand, and asked what the iced tea represented. The professor smiled and said, "I'm glad you asked."

The iced tea just shows you that no matter how full your life may seem, there's always room for a couple of drinks with a friend.

So on that light note, my hope is that you have a fabulous Father's Day, and may God bless all fathers and their children, everywhere.

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¹ Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Make Room for Daddy* (UNC Press, 2009), reviewed in article by Jonathan Last, *Wall Street Journal*, June 4, 2009.

² Dick Lindsey, "Boomer Fathers and Sons," *Presbyterian Outlook*, June 8-15, 2009.