

Who's Your Daddy?

Rev. Mark Hayes

June 17, 2007

Happy Father's Day! Before I get started, I'd like to clear up a possible misunderstanding. As I looked at the cover of the order of service, it occurred to me that it might be misinterpreted. "Who's your daddy? Rev. Mark Hayes, the World's Greatest Dad!" There was a time when religious leaders were seen as father figures, wielders of authority. But times have changed. Not only has the ministry become much less overwhelmingly male – the emphasis has also shifted away from authoritarianism to a kinder gentler form of spiritual and religious leadership. But then the concept of fatherhood itself has shifted with time, too, as suggested by our reading this morning. Perhaps I am in fact a father figure, but along more modern, enlightened lines.

So why am I talking about fathers today? Well, because it's Father's Day, and I decided it was about time we recognized that. I've done Mother's Day sermons on several occasions, and while I have sometimes used those opportunities to broaden the discussion to parenting in general, I've always ended up giving short shrift to Father's Day. No more! It's time for us fathers to get some attention.

A month ago I spoke about the history of Mother's Day, going all the way back to 1870 and Unitarian Julia Ward Howe. Well, it seems that Father's Day was a bit of an afterthought, nearly forty years later. Not surprisingly, there is more than one story about its origins, but several of those stories take place in about the same time period, between 1908 and 1910.

One story dates the first modern Father's Day celebration to July 5, 1908, in Fairmont, West Virginia. Apparently a woman named Grace Golden Clayton suggested to her pastor a special church service celebrating fathers after a deadly mine explosion that killed 361 men, many of them fathers and recent immigrants to the United States from Italy.

Another story credits Mrs. Sonora Smart Dodd of Spokane, Washington. She wanted to commemorate the death of her father, the Civil War veteran William Jackson Smart, who had raised six children as a single father. She was inspired by the efforts of Anna Jarvis to establish Mother's Day. That "first" Father's Day celebration took place on June 19, 1910 in Spokane.

Once it got started, the idea caught on quickly and Father's Day was soon celebrated in various towns and cities across America. Public figures like William Jennings Bryan and Woodrow Wilson provided unofficial support early on, and in 1924, President Calvin Coolidge recommended Father's Day as a national holiday. It wasn't until 1966, though, that President Lyndon Johnson finally signed a presidential proclamation declaring the third Sunday of June as Father's Day.

And so here we are. But what is it, exactly, about fathers that we are to celebrate? And are all fathers worthy of celebration? The first point, of course, is that we owe our very existence to a father as well as to a mother. So we may begin by feeling and expressing gratitude to our fathers for giving us life, for bringing us into the world. But then what? Ernest Hemingway once wrote that "To be a successful father . . . there's one absolute rule: when you have a kid, don't look at it for the first two years." And according to Swedish writer J. August Strindberg, "That is the thankless position of the father in the family – the provider for all, and the enemy of all."

Those two statements, of course, reflect the older, outdated model of parenthood. Father as marginally present provider and enforcer. Mother as nurturer and comforter. That model has changed for a number of reasons. Perhaps the greatest factor has been the changing role of women. As women have taken to the workplace in greater numbers – either out of economic

necessity or in quest of greater personal fulfillment – the role of homemaker and child-rearer has required some adjustment as well.

Of course some men, perfectly content with traditional gender roles, may not have stepped in to fill the breach, leaving their wives to play the role of super-woman – breadwinner by day, mom by night. But those of us with some sense of justice and fair play at least try to do our part, and to share the load as equally as possible. And you know, I don't think it's just a matter of fairness either. In order for me to fulfill my potential, not just as a man, but as a person, I think it's healthy for me to take on as many roles as possible, not just as an enforcer, but also as a nurturer. And I think it's healthy for our children to see us – both mothers and fathers – as multidimensional persons, able to take on a variety of roles as appropriate or necessary, and not see us limited by narrow role expectations.

I've suggested a shift over time in role expectations, and that has certainly occurred. But I don't want to suggest that that shift is universally embraced by all. I've spoken before about the work of political writer George Lakoff, who draws some striking parallels between family life and political life with respect to the very shift that I've been talking about. In looking at the differences between conservative and progressive approaches to life and politics, Lakoff develops a pair of models couched in the metaphor of the family. He talks about the "strict father model" and the "nurturant parent model". Each grows out of a particular set of assumptions and values that end up being expressed both in political life and in family life. Family here is a metaphor, but it's more than just a metaphor – it's also a part of real life.

Let me share with you a part of Lakoff's descriptions of his two models:

The strict father model begins with a set of assumptions:

The world is a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is so difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good.

What is needed in this kind of a world is a strong, strict father who can:

- Protect the family in the dangerous world,
- Support the family in the difficult world, and
- Teach his children right from wrong.

What is required of the child is obedience, because the strict father is a moral authority who knows right from wrong. It is further assumed that the only way to teach kids obedience – that is, right from wrong – is through punishment, painful punishment, when they do wrong. This includes hitting them, and some authors on conservative child rearing recommend sticks, belts, and wooden paddles on the bare bottom.

The strict father model is so named because it considers the father the "head" of the family. The nurturant parent model, however, is gender neutral, and so doesn't differentiate roles on a gender-specific basis. In this view, writes Lakoff:

Both parents are equally responsible for raising the children. The assumption is that children are born good and can be made better. The

world can be made a better place, and our job is to work on that. The parents' job is to nurture their children and to raise their children to be nurturers of others.

What does nurturance mean? It means two things: empathy and responsibility. . . In addition, all sorts of other values immediately follow from empathy and responsibility. Think about it.

First, if you empathize with your child, you will provide protection. . . Second, if you empathize with your child, you want your child to be fulfilled in life, to be a happy person. . . [I]t is your moral responsibility to teach your child to be a happy, fulfilled person who wants others to be happy and fulfilled. That is part of what nurturing family life is about. It is a common precondition for caring about others.

Lakoff goes on to describe the kinds of values that grow out of this approach to parenthood. They include freedom, opportunity, fairness, two-way communication, cooperation, trust, and honesty.

Now I want to caution you, as I often do, against getting too carried away with an absolute black/white, either/or way of looking at things. For the purpose of clarity, Lakoff has explained his models in their extreme forms. But of course life is never quite that simple. When I read Lakoff's descriptions, it seems an easy choice. Of course I want to be a nurturant parent as opposed to a strict father, and I want to promote those progressive values that that implies. But the influences that have shaped me and made me who I am are varied, and I must recognize that.

Reflecting on my own father, and how he raised me, has been an interesting experience. In many ways I think he played a transitional role in the shift in parenting styles. The major influences in his life – his parents, for instance – came primarily from the old-school, conservative approach. My memories of my grandfather are of a stern, cold man who set a lot of strict rules: no movies, no card-playing, etc. From what I know of my father's life, he did go through a time of rebellion against his father's strict ways. He kicked up his heels and had some pretty wild times. And I'm sure I don't know the half of it.

But when my dad got married and settled down, he took his responsibility as head of his family seriously. He was primarily the provider and disciplinarian. I remember him working three jobs when I was small. And I remember occasional encounters with hand or belt on the rear end. Household responsibilities also broke down pretty traditionally. Mom cooked, cleaned, sewed and watched us kids. Dad worked his jobs, did outside chores and repairs around the house.

But the sense in which he was a transitional figure was that, although he pretty much followed traditional gender roles, he did not raise us to do so. He encouraged us boys to learn cooking and cleaning and taking care of the younger kids. That is, he encouraged us to become well-rounded, multi-dimensional people capable of handling whatever tasks we might encounter. I think he understood the value of going beyond traditional gender roles, even though he was, to a large extent, stuck in them himself. And for that I am grateful to him.

I am also grateful to him for using not only harsh discipline to instill moral values in us, but also the example of his own life. Once, when I stole a candy bar from the grocery store and then lied about it, he tried to teach me the virtue of honesty by washing my mouth out with soap. All I remember from that experience is the nauseating taste of the soap. But the lesson of honesty took root in me when I saw him find an envelope of cash at the night deposit box of the

bank, and turn it in even as he scrimped and pinched pennies to provide for his own family. I hope I can be as good an example to my children.

Fatherhood, like motherhood, is a huge job. No one does it perfectly. Some of us do it better than others. Probably none of us fathers are appreciated as much as we think we deserve for our sacrifices and our generosity and our hard work. Especially by those whose fathers we are. It helps me some to think back on my own attitude as a youngster. I, for instance, shared the experience of Mark Twain, who wrote “When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.”

As we, all of us – men, women, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, friends, and neighbors – seek to carry out those tasks and roles normally associated with fathers – whether it be problem-solver, or playmate, or principled guide, or provider, or preparer – may we at the same time be filled with gratitude for those who have played those roles for us as we have become the people that we are.

But I’d like to close today by not just honoring those roles of fatherhood, regardless of who played them for us. I’d like to close by taking time for us to honor the persons who were, or are, our fathers. Last month I shared a meditation on mothers from Gabrielle Roth’s book, *Maps to Ecstasy*. Today I’d like to offer a meditation on fathers from the same source. Please get comfortable; close your eyes if you wish:

Imagine your father sitting opposite you: how does he hold himself, how does he look, what is the basic impression he makes on you – weariness, anger, impatience, ebullience, calm?

Think of three things you love about him, three qualities you find endearing. Think of three things that put you off, alienate you. Reflect on how all these qualities are in you as well, on how much alike you are, how intimately connected.

Look your dad in the eye. Let your feelings about him surface, and imagine saying them to him. Empty your heart of all the things you might have choked back for years, telling him everything you feel till there’s nothing left. Imagine what he would say in response and let him say his piece. Then breathe calm into the empty space that is left.

Imagine, too, making physical contact with your father, touching him, holding his hand, hugging, him, rocking him. Let the blocked affection for him flow and receive his in return.

Then let him go back to his place. Look him in the eye again and search your heart for the courage to thank and forgive him, to forgive and thank yourself. Forgive him for his weaknesses and failings; thank him for making you who you are and being there for you when he was.

And now, as we return to this time and place, may we each find the resolve within us to be the kind of parent or friend or loved one that we had, or wish we had.

So may it be.