

**A FATHER'S LOVE**  
(Father's Day, June 21, 2009)

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I know that some of you read the lectionary passages faithfully every week. So do I, usually. Now if I had stayed with this week's lectionary texts, I might have talked about the good guys winning, as in the account of David vs. Goliath in I Samuel 17. I might have spun off on the Los Angeles Lakers, or maybe the Dodgers or the Angels. Sometimes, the lectionary is not helpful when it comes to certain occasions. Today is Father's Day. Father's Day is not on the liturgical calendar. Neither is Mother's Day or Thanksgiving. These three days are national holidays that we often recognize in church. Christmas and Easter are liturgical events that the secular society celebrates with those of us in the church in some fashion.

I did a little research this past week, and I learned that Garrison Keillor, on his "Writer's Almanac" on National Public Radio, reminds us that Father's Day goes back about 100 years, to a Sunday morning in May of 1909. A woman named Sonora Smart Dodd was sitting in church in Spokane, Washington, listening to a Mother's day sermon. She thought of her father who had raised her and her siblings after her mother died in childbirth, and she thought that fathers should get recognition, too. So she asked the minister of the church if he would deliver a sermon honoring fathers on her father's birthday, which was coming up in June, and the minister did. And the tradition of Father's Day caught on, though rather slowly. Mother's Day became an official holiday in 1914; Father's Day was proclaimed the third Sunday in June, by President Calvin Coolidge in 1924. It became official in 1972, under President Richard Nixon. Mother's Day is still the busiest day of the year for florists, restaurants and long distance phone companies. Father's Day is the day on which the most collect phone calls are made.

A grade school teacher asked a little girl to tell the class what Father's Day was. The child thought for a minute and then said, "It's just like Mother's Day only

you don't spend as much for the present."

Some years back, Bill Cosby wrote a book simply entitled, FATHERHOOD. If you ever get a chance to read it, I suggest you do. It is thoroughly humorous and you will also learn a few things along the way. I want to share two observations with you that Cosby makes about fathers. He writes:

Now that my father is a grandfather, he just can't wait to give money to my kids. But when I was a kid and asked him for fifty cents, he would tell me the story of his life. How he got up at 4 A.M. when he was seven years old and walked twenty-three miles to milk ninety cows. And the farmer for whom he worked had no bucket, so he had to squirt the milk into his little hand and then walk eight miles to the nearest can. All for 5 cents a month. The result was that I never got my 50 cents.

But now he tells my children every time he comes into the house: "Well, let's see how much money old granddad has got for his wonderful kids." And the minute they take that money out of his hands I call them over to me and I snatch it away from them. Because it is MY money.

The other story that Cosby tells that I like is the difference between Mother's Day and Father's Day. He insists that Mother's Day is a much bigger deal because Mothers are more organized. Mothers say to their children: Now here is a list of what I want. Go get the money from your father and you surprise me on Mother's Day. You do that for me.

For Father's Day I give each of my five kids \$20 so that they can go out and buy me a present – a total of \$100. They go to the store and buy two packages of underwear, each of which costs \$5 and contains three shorts. They tear them open and each kid wraps up one pair, the sixth pair of underwear going to the Salvation Army. Therefore, On Father's Day I am walking around with new underwear and my kids are walking around with \$90 worth of my change in their pockets. The sad thing is that Cosby's own relationship with his father remained unresolved, referring to the days when "My own father used me for batting practice."

Well, of course, Father's Day is technically not a religious holiday; it is a secular day. But, it is not, for that reason, less appropriate for our consideration. We also don't simply want to give equal billing to fathers because we gave homage to mothers a month ago. We want to recognize dads for another very

important reason. The message that is going out to so much of society today is that fathers are simply not needed. President Barack Obama has addressed this several times in speeches. He points out how very essential it is for fathers to remain a part of the family constellation. On the other hand, while the number may numerically be small, there are some women who actually choose to be single parent mothers. And there are too many men in America today who father children that they have no intention of raising. The church, therefore, needs to send out the message loud and clear that fathers do play a critical role in the life of the family, that they are needed, and that God expects something of them. Now, fathers, you will have a powerful impact upon your family if you connect in some crucial areas.

A pastor was quizzing the children during the children's sermon about the influences in their lives. "Who taught you to count?" he asked.

Tommy piped up and said, "My Dad taught me to count."

"Great, Tommy," said the pastor. "What comes after eight?"

"Nine," Tommy answered confidently.

"And what comes after nine?" asked the pastor.

"Ten," Tommy said triumphantly.

"And what comes after ten?" asked the pastor.

"A jack," said Tommy.

We learn lots of things from our fathers, don't we?

The account of the prodigal son in Luke's gospel this morning is one of the prototypes for fatherly love in the Bible. No matter what the wayward son has done, he is welcomed back into the family. Certainly there is the Biblical truth that none of us is perfect. In his book titled, *LETTERS TO MY SON, REFLECTIONS ON BECOMING A MAN*, Kent Nerburn writes, "It is much easier to become a father than to be one." It is never too late to come home. And its never too late to come home to a good father. (1)Not every Dad is a great Dad. I understand that. But there are many Dads who are doing the best they can. And we salute them this day.

There is an account about a remarkable young man named Rick Hoyt and his Dad. Rick was born with cerebral palsy. Rick's condition was so severe that doctors suggested his parents send him to an institution. But the Hoyt family wanted Rick to live up to his potential, whatever that potential might be.

For ten years they searched for a way for Rick to communicate with them. Can you imagine that? Waiting ten years to hear your child say something, anything, to you? When he was ten years old, Rick was finally able to communicate with his family with the help of a new computer device. They soon discovered that Rick was an intelligent kid with a passion for sports.

One day, Rick learned that his town was sponsoring a 5K race to raise money for children who are paralyzed in accidents. Rick wanted to find some way to run in that race, so he convinced his father, Dick Hoyt, to run the race while pushing Rick's wheelchair. At the time, Dick was out of shape. But he was willing to try anything to bond with his son. So Dick began running every day while pushing Rick's wheelchair. At the end of their first race, Rick typed into his computer, "Dad, I felt like I wasn't handicapped."

Since that day, Dick and Rick Hoyt have run 371 races together. But listen to this: This young man with severe cerebral palsy, Rick Hoyt, now works at Boston University designing computer programs for people with disabilities. (2) Wow.

Now I'm certain his mother is just as much a part of this story as his dad, but can't you see Rick's father pushing that wheelchair in race after race, determined with all his might to watch his son succeed in life? What a beautiful and inspiring story.

Writer Max Lucado tells about another dad named Lee Ielp. Lee is a retired firefighter, a New York City firefighter. He gave 26 years to the city. But on September 11, 2001, he gave much more. He gave his son. Jonathan Ielp was a fireman as well. When the Twin Towers fell, he was there.

Firefighters are a loyal clan. When one perishes in the line of duty, the body is left where it is until a firefighter who knows the person can come and quite literally pick it up. Lee made the discovery of his son's body his personal mission. He dug daily with dozens of others at the sixteen-acre graveyard. On Tuesday, December 11, three months after the disaster, his son was found. And Lee was there to carry him out. (3)

Jonathan's Dad didn't give up. He didn't quit. He refused to turn and leave. Why? Because his love for his son was greater than the pain of the search.

A father's love. I hear a Father's love in Jesus' words, WE ARE LOVED. That's the first thing we need to see. We are loved. Some of us didn't have parents who could make us feel loved. They did love us in their own way, but somehow

they weren't able to communicate that love. Some of us have deep scars--a deep emotional emptiness--because that love wasn't communicated.

Former Chicago Bears football great Mike Singletary was twelve years old when his father abandoned the family. Singletary's dad was just living out a long legacy in the Singletary family of men who had never known a father's love and were unequipped to pass on a healthy legacy of love to their own children. When Mike Singletary became a father, he determined that he would break that legacy. He would rely on his faith in God and the support of others to become a loving father and an excellent example to his children. But it all had to start with his decision to forgive his father for the abandonment.

After retiring from football, Mike Singletary became a professional speaker. In addition to speaking before large corporations and conventions, he also donated his time to speak in prisons. Singletary soon learned that many prisoners shared his same family legacy of abandonment or abuse by their fathers. While speaking at a women's prison, Singletary felt God leading him to apologize to the women on behalf of all the fathers and other men who abused or neglected them. The reaction to his apology was stunning. Many of the women began to weep. It was obvious that they had deep hurts that needed to be healed, and this surrogate apology seemed to be a good start.

In 1995, Singletary spoke on forgiveness at a men's prison in Texas. Afterwards, one of the Hispanic inmates approached Singletary. He was crying. He began hitting Singletary in the chest and repeating one name over and over again, "Papa! Papa! Papa!" Guards tried to pull him away, but Mike Singletary stopped them. He was willing to absorb this man's pain, if it would help in his healing process. (4)

There are many people who bear scars from their early experiences in families where love was not communicated. Maybe you are one of them. It is my happy task this day to say to you, you are loved. In southern Africa, The Bebemba tribe has a fascinating procedure for combating feelings of rejection. Each person in the tribe who acts irresponsibly or unjustly is taken alone to the center of the village. Everyone in the village stops work and gathers in a large circle around the accused. In turn, each person in the tribe--regardless of age--speaks to the individual, recounting aloud the good things he has done in his lifetime. All the

positive incidents in the person's life, plus his good attributes, strengths, and kindnesses, are recalled with accurate detail. Not one word about his irresponsible or antisocial behavior is shared.

The ceremony, which sometimes lasts for several days, isn't complete until every positive expression has been given by those assembled. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the person is welcomed back into the tribe. Can you imagine the flood of feelings during the tribe's welcome? Can you imagine the extent of acceptance he realizes? Can you imagine how you would feel if a group of people affirmed you in this way? (5)

You are loved. There is One who sees you without your scars, even without your sins. You are loved.

**YOU ARE PART OF A FAMILY.** That's what church is at its best. Church is a family. Here you have people who will care about you if you give them the chance. A church is a group of people who love God and love one another and who are committed to serving the world for which Christ died. We bear one another's burdens. We pray for one another. And when one of us hurts, all of us hurt.

In *Chicken Soup for the Christian Teenage Soul*, Mary Cornelia Van Sant tells her story.

When she was fourteen, in a two-week period before Thanksgiving, her dad developed hepatitis and died. It was a total shock to their family. Their father had always been so healthy. He'd only been sick once before and had bounced back quickly.

As one of eight children, Mary says she was usually lost in the crowd. Now, however, adults sought her out to console her. They told her how much she resembled her father and what a good man he had been. There was an outpouring of love, visitors and food to their home. She confesses that the months that followed her father's death were quite beautiful, in a weird way. Mary had never felt so immersed in love.

At school, none of Mary's friends knew what to say to her. She did have one friend who came to see her at her house the day after her dad died. Her friend sat quietly beside Mary. Mary says she now realizes how much courage that must have taken. Besides her, none of Mary's other friends acknowledged her father's death. They acted awkward around her. It was a strange feeling.

Several months later, one of the cheerleaders in her class, a girl named Abby, lost her father to a massive heart attack. Usually, Abby was in the midst of a huge crowd. She seemed alone most of the time now.

Mary approached Abby tentatively one day during lunch. “I think I know how you’re feeling,” Mary said. “My dad died a few months ago.”

Mary didn’t know what to expect. She was a little intimidated. She didn’t mix with the in-crowd too easily. They were all so good-looking and popular.

Abby looked Mary squarely in the face. Her eyes widened. And then she seemed to relax. They talked until the bell rang.

After that day, they chatted regularly. Sometimes, says Mary, it felt like they were in their own little world. They’d share stories and giggle about their dads. It felt good for Mary to have a connection with her dad through their talks. She cherished them.

The next school year a girl named Terry lost her dad. Terry was kind of nerdy. She was tall and skinny. Not even Mary’s crowd had much to do with her. Once again, Mary approached someone out of her need to have a bond with her father.

“I heard your dad died. My dad died last year,” Mary told Terry.

Terry sighed, then gave her a description of her past week. Mary listened to her every word.

As soon as Mary could find Abby, she told her about Terry. Abby responded like Mary did. It was as if they were on a deserted island, says Mary, and they had caught sight of a shipwrecked victim floating toward them.

They became a threesome. Not in a social way--they didn’t really hang out together--but they snatched a few moments at their lockers and in homeroom to share bits of their dads. Just having someone who understood when they were going through a tough week was comforting.

Mary still has her yearbook in which Abby wrote, “Thanks for being my buddy. I needed you.” Occasionally, she hears from Terry. Mary says she has continued to reach out to people who are in pain. She notes that she has received comfort for herself, too, as a result of connecting with others.

“Being able to reach out to others has returned blessings to me a hundredfold,” says Mary, “I thank my dad for this lasting and life-affirming gift.”

(6)Mary discovered what many of us have discovered in the church, when we reach out to others, we bless ourselves as well.

What more can I say to you on this Father's Day, 2009? You are loved. You have a family. It's this group of people right here. That is our calling as the people of God in Redlands United Church of Christ--to reach out to one another as Christ has reached out to us. Amen and Amen!

1. John A. Huffman, in a sermon preached at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, CA, June 15, 2008.
2. John C. Maxwell. *Teamwork Makes the Dream Work* (Nashville, TN: J. Countryman, 2002), pp. 113-116.
3. Deborah Hastings, "Firefighters' Reward: Carrying Son's Body," *San Antonio Express News*. Cited in *A Love Worth Giving*, Max Lucado (Nashville: 2002).
4. Mike Singletary with Russ Pate, *Daddy's Home at Last* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 36-43.
5. Norman Wright, *Real Solutions for Overcoming Discouragement, Rejection, and the Blues* (Ann Arbor, MI: H. Servant Publications, 2001).
6. From: Chicken Soup for the Christian Teenage Soul, <http://isbn.nu/0757300952>. Source: The Inspired Buffalo, [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/the-inspired-buffalo/WITandWISDOM\(tm\)](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/the-inspired-buffalo/WITandWISDOM(tm)) - May 26, 2004.