

“Father’s Day”

Sermon for Sunday, June 20th, 2010 by The Rev. Joe Summers

On Friday Megan and Stephen had a baby boy whom they’ve named “Archie.” I’ve known no greater joy than having children. This “Father’s Day” I want to talk about fathers and fatherhood, but I want to talk about them in the broad context of two different impulses that take us in completely different directions.

The first movement, direction, is that of what we call the Holy Spirit. It is the movement of Incarnation. The movement of the Spirit is to become embodied, incarnated, in things, in life, in human beings, in being, and in actions. As St. Augustine says, “Love calls us to the things of this world.”

The other movement, direction, is a movement in the opposite direction, a movement away from things, away from life, away from human beings and being human, away from embodied action. I think it is an impulse--rooted in fear. I want to focus today a bit more on this second movement. Some of what I’m going to say is a little abstract, but I’m hoping you’ll hang in there. I’m hoping these ideas will help us to reflect on the concrete specificity of our lives and relationships, but if they don’t do that -- let them go, because it’s that concrete specificity that’s really important.

Okay--so what do I mean by an impulse away from things, life, and humanity?

In the early critique of capitalism that is found in his “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” Karl Marx says that, under capitalism, there is a kind of de-materialization of the world. Things stop being valued for their thingness--and become valued instead for their exchange value. That is, rather than valuing your house for how well it houses you, or your car for how well it drives, or your partner for how well they care for you, you value them for how they impress the neighbors and what they say about your status in society. They become simply signs. If I remember the metaphor correctly, Marx describes this as a process which is almost like everything being sucked up and disappearing into thin air. If you really value this world--it’s a very troubling image.

This movement towards abstraction, of ceasing to value and experience things for their thingness or people for who they are, is at the heart of what the Bible calls idolatry. Rooted in fear, idolatry is the attempt to move away from the fluid, complex, vulnerable, and infinite nature of existence towards something that is fixed, finite, and static, as a way to feel in control of life. We create idols as a way to feel control over life and instead, the psalms tell us, idolatry makes us into things. We become people with mouths that can’t speak, ears that can’t hear, hearts that can’t feel or love.

We see these two movements, these two directions, the movement of the Holy Spirit and this movement towards idolatry, battling it out within people and society everywhere. It is part of

what the incredible story of Elijah is about.

Elijah is terrified. Queen Jezebel has pledged to kill him. Elijah believes that he alone has kept the true faith and that everyone else is now out to get him. He goes to a cave where he hears God calling him out. He witnesses a great wind, a wind so strong that it is splitting mountains and breaking rocks into pieces.

It is clearly the kind power that Elijah feels he needs to protect himself from the Queen but... God is not in the whirlwind. After the whirlwind, an earthquake, and after the earthquake, a great fire--again, just the kind of power we look for when we're terrified. But God was not in the earthquake or the fire. After the fire, the story continues, "the sound of sheer silence". When Elijah hears it, he wraps his face in his mantle and goes out and stands at the entrance to the cave. Then he hears the voice of God telling him he is not alone, and that he should go join up with the 7,000 other people who have kept the faith.

The silence and the still small voice that emerges in the midst of it--seem like --the opposite of what we're wanting, when we're controlled by our fear. Yet it is the voice of the living God. When we're terrified, our hearts crave control, domination, the power of the whirlwind, fire, and earthquake, but all God offers us is--living presence. But, according to the eye-witness reports we have in our psalms, the experience of holy presence, despite seeming so ephemeral, is a power that enables us to walk through the deluge without being overcome, to walk through the valley of the shadow of death without being afraid, to feast and have overflowing joy--even when we're being threatened. But it requires of us that capacity to wait for the silence and to resist making idols, rooted in the fears of our hearts.

Nowhere is this struggle in our hearts, between these two impulses, the movement of the Holy Spirit, and this movement towards idolatry, more graphically visible than in the struggle over fatherhood.

In most species you find little of what we call fatherhood, that is, the males of a species simply contribute their DNA and then move on. Indeed, an article this week in the science section of the New York Times said that, in 90% of the species of mammals, the male has little to do with the care and nurturing of the young. (See page D1 from Tuesday, June 15th, NY Times article "Paternal Bonds Special and Strange"). However, most primates are in the last 10 percent. So this drive to protect, nurture, and care for the young, among males, is not something to be assumed or taken lightly. It seems woven into our evolution. Yet clearly, it's something we're still working out.

Erik Erickson says the mental health of adults depends on our ability to express our drive to care for and nurture others, and yet so often we see this drive blocked. I don't know of any sorrow greater than that of parents whose children die, and yet I think the sorrow of those who have been unable to care for their children, or are cut off from them, is equally great. There is also a parallel sorrow among youth who have to grow up with a parent or parents who don't

care for them, and are therefore forced to try to find other mothers or fathers who will give them the care and nurturance we all need.

Ironically, in my experience, one of the ways so many fathers are cut off from their drive to love and care for their children happens because of patriarchy. A tradition, an idea, that I suspect was in part rooted in this drive to care and nurture, has, in so many parts of the world, taken on an idolatrous stature that keeps men from being able to really express their love and care for their children.

Jesus said that no thing, no idea, even ideas as good as the Sabbath, is to rule over the human one, and yet so many of us find ourselves slaves to an idea of who we are supposed to be as fathers that has little to do with who we are or what would be most helpful in terms of the care and nurturing of our families.

Our superegos are fully formed by something like age four. They're meant to guide us until we are strong and wise enough to protect ourselves. However, they also internalize lots of ideas that we form about the world, particularly from how we experience it through our parents, but also from the broader culture. Through our mens' groups, I've come to find that most men seem to have superegos that are ready to violently abuse us, if we do not seem to be good providers for our families and communities, which can make things like unemployment an almost life-threatening experience. Our superegos will also abuse us for a wide variety of other things --like not seeming to be in control of our families. I can see how this idea of one person controlling a family is helpful, if you're like Nanook of the North and living in a context where you are continually threatened by real dangers which require everyone to work together at a moment's notice to survive, but... that's not the world most of us live in most of the time. To have our superegos castigate us and shame us when our families aren't following our internalized sense of how things are supposed to be, is totally unhelpful.

I have a readiness to fight that I suspect is part of the evolution of males. This readiness to fight may ultimately be useful, but it can also be a real barrier when it comes to nurturing your loved ones. I think it's why so many of our dads come home from work and hide behind newspapers and/or alcohol -- trying to chill out, so they/we don't attack our loved ones after days of feeling triggered at work. And yet that anger still comes out, if our kids are too wild, or scream, or talk disrespectfully. Then, on top of having to deal with whatever the problem is, we have to deal with this rage within us that, at times, seems almost ready to kill. I love the Babylonian creation myth, where the parent gods decide to kill their children for waking them up from their nap. Though it's so clearly over the top, it's an impulse I can identify with.

Different men have different ways of dealing with the patriarchal programming that comes through our superegos, but I don't think anyone gets away with not having to deal with it. Some simply channel their superegos and become self-righteous, fearsome father figures. Others go in the opposite direction, hoping that, if they avoid family and commitment, this beast won't be unleashed in them. Most of us are in the middle--trying to do our best to love and

nurture and protect--- sometimes feeling righteous, because we're going along with our super-egos, more often feeling castigated and ashamed because we can't make ourselves, our lives, and relationships, partners, and children fit into the model that's been imprinted in our brains. But neither place is where we want to be living. If we want to be good fathers, who truly love, nurture, protect, and care for our loved ones, we need to tell our superegos that their time of helpfulness is past, and that it's time for us to be present in the ways we need to be present--for ourselves and others.

Here is a paraphrase of what we heard today from Paul's letter to the church in Galatia. As you hear it...you will hear the way the law functions for Paul in the way the superego functions for us and our need to get out from under both:

“Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law...the law was our disciplinarian... But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus we are all children of God (that is free people) through faith... Through faith there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, (and today I would add mothers or fathers), for all of us are One in Christ Jesus...heirs according to the promise.”

We are baptized into Christ, who is the first-born of a new humanity, a humanity that is free and yet-- so many of us are like the man we hear about in our gospels today--possessed and controlled by ideas and spirits and feelings, many of which may have been useful at some time in our lives, or in our evolution, but which are now threatening to destroy us and our loved ones. We need to claim the passion and power to free ourselves and each other from this enslavement.

Just like the critique of capitalism, I think our critique of patriarchy is growing much more nuanced and complex. Where patriarchy had been seen by early feminists to be simply a system of male domination, now we can see how both men and women cooperated to develop this system, not necessarily primarily to promote male domination, but because it seemed to be the best way for people and communities to protect and care for themselves and each other. But human beings are not to be subject to things of their own creation. At the point at which these systems, these ideas, come to rule us, rather than serve us, they need to be overthrown. This doesn't mean throwing out everything. It means sorting through what we think is good and useful from what is not, and letting go of what's unhelpful. We need to do this for the well-being of all, but on this day in which we're holding up our fathers in love, I want to emphasize our need to do it for the sake of our fathers and our relationships with them.

Torn between the drive to love and care for our loved ones, and the demands of patriarchy, fatherhood has come to have such an ambiguous legacy. Many of us know our fathers as people who deeply loved us, and yet have experienced a lot that is really unloving and uncaring from them. Many of us fathers have experienced much that is unloving and uncaring in ourselves. Forgiveness becomes a vital and necessary tool for us, to be in relationship with our fathers, with ourselves. And here I want to note that Desmond Tutu suggests that, if we're having trou-

ble forgiving anyone, we should hold up an image of them and what they looked like--- when they were five years old. It's a helpful exercise.

It's also what I love so much about this song, "Dance with my father." It reminds me of my father, the human being I loved so much, the one who was so often hidden by the demands, abuses, and neglect that seem to go with patriarchy, and yet who I know loved me to death. It's a dream of the day when we are free to be together, dance together, without all the garbage that comes with patriarchy getting in the way.

So, as a way to honor all those men who loved, cared for, and nurtured us, whether they were our biological fathers or our adoptive fathers, that is, the men in our lives who really did care for us and nurture us, I'd like us to listen to this song as a kind of prayer for all our fathers and for a new day in which men are freed to love others in the ways we want to in the deepest parts of our being, in ways that are truly loving and caring.

After we listen to it, we will have a little time for collective reflection, but I hope, in that, you will take time to let all the noise, that this reflection may have stirred up, pass by, so you can hear the still small voice and share that voice, so that all may be fed.

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.