

Pentecost Proper 6A
The Rev. Paul J. Carling, Ph.D.

Trinity Episcopal Church
June 18, 2017

The Truth about Fathers
Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

*“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them,
because they were harassed and helpless,
like sheep without a shepherd.”*

The happiest memory of my childhood is our family’s summer trips to the beach. The endless steamy subway rides from lower Manhattan to Coney Island, rushing to Nathan’s Hot Dog stand for an ice cream, the sand burning our feet, then the shock of plunging into the cold surf. But the real highlight was when my Dad, a strong swimmer, would lay me on his back, and I’d hold on tight while he swam way out beyond the waves. And when he reached what felt to me like the deepest part of the ocean, he would simply start floating, until he fell asleep.

I should confess at this point that I was, and still am a terrible swimmer. So for me to lie on his back and let him lead me out into the deep required a level of trust that was simply extraordinary for a young boy.

Maybe that’s why the image of the Good Shepherd is such a precious one for me – a father figure who knows the sound of your voice, who always protects and guides you, who’s emotionally sensitive, who loves you through success and failure. A father who’d never dream of hurting you, and who encourages you, as Jesus did in today’s gospel, to go out into the world living out your values and ideals, knowing you are always welcome back home, in victory or defeat.

Well, if you had a father like that, or even ever met a perfect father like that, count yourself very very blessed, because most of us never did. Most of us had fathers who were profoundly human – complicated and often volatile mixtures of the good, the bad and the ugly. And that’s especially true of the fathers who lived through the Great Depression and World War II, a generation that was taught to navigate tough times, not by sharing their feelings or asking for support, but with a stiff upper lip, powering through the challenges of life, the fewer the words the better. Fathers who were much more focused on responsibility than joy. And some of us had fathers who, when things got too much to bear, turned to alcohol or violence for relief. Fathers, you see, like everyone else, are a mixed bag.

I mention this because on Father’s Day, we tend to idealize fathers. From greeting cards to TV ads, we paint a picture of some perfect character that none of us – our fathers or grandfathers or even ourselves as fathers, can ever live up to. Pretending that all fathers should be some kind of mythical mix of Mr. Rogers and Superman leaves most of feeling inadequate, like we are living a lie.

And it leaves us feeling guilty for speaking the truth about what our fathers were actually like, or what kind of fathers we actually were or are. What binds we put ourselves in.

That's not to say we shouldn't celebrate fathers – we should and we must – and certainly not just for one day a year. Being a healthy, loving father is an incredibly hard job, and none of us – none of us – does it even close to perfection. So we celebrate fathers – all fathers today – knowing that regardless of the outcome, we fathers do the best we can with what we are given. And against great odds.

Think about the messages we learn as children about being a man – the Marlboro Man; the rugged individual; the strong silent type; the tough guy who doesn't give an inch when you cross him; the boy who grins and bears it and who never, never cries; the highly competitive, aggressive businessman who gets paid based on performance, on "eating what you kill." With a constant stream of messages like this, isn't it a sheer miracle that any of us grow up to become loving, faithful, emotionally nurturing, gentle, supportive and wise fathers?

Which is why today's gospel image of the Good Shepherd is so wonderful. Not because it's some kind of model for how God expects us to be, a model we look at and immediately feel inadequate. The Good Shepherd is not a script for how God commands us to be, it's a description of how God is toward each of us. Jesus is telling us today that if we can just accept that God loves us exactly as we are – the good, the bad, and the ugly – and keeps loving us so that we can be healed from all these unhealthy messages, we can actually become, day by day, the beautiful caring father God knows we are in our heart of hearts.

And because Jesus is not only fully God, but also fully human, in today's gospel, even Jesus can't get this shepherd thing, this father thing right. Listen to what Jesus says when he sends out the twelve apostles, "*Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the children of Israel.*" Jesus is parroting the same tired lines of the Pharisees: Gentiles and Samaritans are losers, inferior, untouchable even. God only loves the chosen people of Israel.

But Jesus' father, Abba, God the Father, keeps working on Jesus's heart, just as God keeps working on our hearts – to expand our vision to embrace God's love for the entire human race. And God's inspiration works. Thirteen chapters later in Matthew, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is condemning that same prejudice he once embraced, and radically redefining for his people who their true neighbors are. What a miracle to watch Jesus himself grow in awareness of what love means.

God, of course, is in the business of miracles, and I think the hope of Father's Day lies in seeing the absolutely extraordinary changes that fatherhood has undergone in so short a time. In general, our generation has been so much more open and loving with our children than our fathers dared to be, haven't we?

And I simply marvel at how much better a parent my son is than I was. For me, these transformations, in just two generations, is absolute proof of God's healing presence and action in a world so in need of good shepherding, good fathering.

And the best part about this business of fathering is that it's never too late. If your dad is still alive, there is always room to deepen that relationship. It may not mean having deeply meaningful talks – sometimes that's just not in the cards – but it could mean committing yourself on this Father's Day to a new level of acceptance and love – toward your father, or your children, or some other young person in your life who needs a dad. If you can take that next step in these relationships, it can make a world of difference in the years to come.

And if your father's passed away? Well, my dad died when I was still a rebellious teenager and believe me, our conversations were pretty rough in the last few years of his life. So I began the process of healing after he died, and now barely a day goes by without my checking in with him, seeking his advice, and listening to him chuckle about the quandaries I'm always getting myself into.

My friends, fathers are only angels after they're gone. Until then, let's embrace their humanity and our humanity, and with God's help, while we're here on earth, let's all just try to do the best we can.