

FATHER AND SON
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
June 19, 2011

Happy Fathers Day to all of us who are fathers, and Happy Fathers Day to all of us who are children of fathers. This is also Trinity Sunday in the Christian liturgical calendar, and as you heard in the gospel lesson from Matthew,ⁱ the resurrected, post-Easter Jesus is said to have called upon his eleven disciples remaining after Judas' betrayal and death to "go...and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In honor of Father's Day, I want to talk this morning about Jesus' understanding of those first two persons of the Trinity, Father and Son, and I'll leave the Holy Spirit for another sermon.

"Father" was the term that Jesus used most often in referring to God, ahead of other words like "Lord" and "King." It's found in all of the gospel accounts.ⁱⁱ Jesus taught his disciples to use the word "Father" when praying to God in the Lord's prayer: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name"ⁱⁱⁱ In fact, some modern translations, like the one we use liturgically here in Memorial Church, use the word "Abba," rather than Father. "Abba" is an Aramaic word -- the language that Jesus spoke -- and "Abba" is a particularly intimate way to refer to one's father, like calling him "Papa" in English.^{iv} In the gospel of Mark, Jesus addresses God as *Abba* in his prayer on the night before his death: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."^v Incidentally, Unitarian Christians, as distinct from Trinitarians, historically used this as one of the proof texts to demonstrate that Jesus as Son of God didn't think that he was identical with God the Father:

In facing his death he recognized it's "not what I want" -- to be spared crucifixion -- "but what you [my Father] want."^{vi}

The first significant reference to God as Father in the Bible comes in relation to King David,^{vii} who reigned a thousand years before Jesus.^{viii} According to the prophet Nathan, God says about David, "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me."^{ix} There are positive and negative dimensions to this kind of fatherhood. On the one hand, God says it means that "I will not take my steadfast love from him," but on the other hand, "When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings."^x As a dictionary of the bible explains, fatherhood in the Bible evokes wrath as well as forgiveness, severity as well as gentleness, and hardness as well as comfort. On the positive side, though, fatherhood also connotes hope and peace.^{xi}

What's required of a son, then in relation to a father, from a biblical perspective? According to two gospel accounts, Jesus affirms the commandment to honor one's father and mother from the Ten Commandments in arguing with the scribes and Pharisees.^{xii} Understanding God as father, we are asked to appreciate the unconditional quality of his love,^{xiii} even when we, like King David, turn blasphemous, adulterous, treacherous and cowardly -- and for it are punished.^{xiv}

Son of God is not just a term used biblically for King David and for Jesus either. In the gospel of Luke, Adam is referred to as son of God.^{xv} In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes peacemakers as children of God,^{xvi} and those who love their enemies as "children of your Father in heaven."^{xvii} The Apostle Paul says that all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God,^{xviii} and all who have faith in Christ are children of God.^{xix} Paul, in speaking to

the Christian community in Corinth, claims that God has said to them, "I will be your father and you shall be my sons and daughters."^{xx}

Indeed, sons and daughters. It's important, on Father's Day, to go beyond speaking of Father and Son, to speaking of Father and sons and daughters. And ultimately to speak of Father and Mother, and sons and daughters. Benedictine sister Joan Chittister has pointed out that although "sonship" is a recognized concept religiously and in common parlance, "daughtership" has never had such a role: "Sons are people with defined family responsibility or identity or mantle; daughters simply come with the family, faceless, anonymous and engulfed in shadow. Sons rise to inherited positions and power and identity. Daughters fade into the fog of family history."^{xxi} So then it becomes problematic to speak of Jesus as the Son of God in Trinitarian terminology. Of course historically he was a male. But the term says something to men that it doesn't to women by virtue of it failing to say anything to them at all. It makes it seem as if God doesn't have daughters, only sons.^{xxii} So thank God, literally, that Paul records that God had said to the Christian community at Corinth, "I will be your father and you shall be my sons and daughters."

So then each one of us becomes a unique child of God. God, just like our own parents, on another level, created us, helped us evolve, and provided what we need. Each of us, emulating Jesus, who was a particularly faithful child of God, can grow into our own full potential of spiritual awareness and accomplishment. Each of us has come from the womb of God in the universe, has been birthed into this world, and has been nursed by life-giving forces into human beings. Notice now that it's not enough either to speak of God only as Father. God of course must be imaged as Mother too. That happens at certain places in the Bible, as when God self-defines as a mother in the book of Isaiah -- as one who nurses, carries her children on

her arms and dandles them on her knees, saying: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you."^{xxiii} But so much of the Bible uses patriarchal father language to describe God, and then we get the Trinitarian formula in Christianity of Father and Son. As Joan Chittister puts it, "Of course God is 'father'; but God is much more than that. 'God,' clearly is a very complex concept. To say otherwise is to come very close to denying belief in God... To use father-language alone to demonstrate the nature of God betrays the very God we believe in. The language limps. The language misleads. The language diminishes."^{xxiv}

Chittister describes one of the ways she was taught this by a six-year-old boy. His mother had just died and Chittister was helping out in the house, putting him into his pajamas after his evening bath. Fresh from his first grade Catholic catechism class, and staring at the crucifix in his room, he said, "Well, by this time Momma's in God's stomach." The Benedictine nun corrected him: "No, no Jimmy, not God's stomach, God's arms. Momma's in God's arms... Why would you think that Mommy is in God's stomach?" "'Well,' the little boy answered with great certainty and patient logic, 'Sister says that God is all around us. And God's stomach is the only place that I can think where you can be if God is all around you.'" Chittister explains that "At that moment I began to understand the power of the term, 'the womb of God.'"^{xxv}

This is Father's Day, though, and fathers deserve recognition for their parenting along with mothers. I must say that my own father, however, was always skeptical about Father's Day. He called it a commercial holiday created to enrich the Hallmark Company. As he explained to me, "Think what mothers go through in carrying a developing fetus inside themselves for nine months, then going through the extreme pain of childbirth, nursing a baby from their own body for months on end, and then usually ending up the primary responsibility for child-rearing. They

deserve Mother's Day and we need to honor them. You need to honor me too, but not with a holiday that somehow seems parallel to Mother's Day."

In fact the first local celebrations of Father's Day go back to the early twentieth century. But Maine Senator Margaret Chase Smith wrote a national Father's Day proposal in 1957, when my own father already had an eight year old. Senator Smith accused Congress of ignoring fathers while honoring mothers with national recognition of Mother's Day, thereby "[singling] out just one of our two parents". The first presidential proclamation honoring fathers didn't come until 1966 under Lyndon Johnson, and then President Nixon finally signed a national holiday into law in 1972. By then my father's oldest child, myself, had already graduated from college and was married. On the other hand, Mother's Day had become a national holiday in 1914.^{xxvi}

President Obama's Father's Day proclamation this year notes that "Parenthood is the ultimate gift and an incredible responsibility. Every day, fathers across our country give everything they have to build a better future for their family, asking nothing in return but their children's love and success." He nods to mothers as he explains that "Fathers, along with our mothers, are our first teachers, coaches, and advisors. They help us grow into adults, consoling us in times of need and celebrating with us in times of triumph... What matters is the unconditional support, guidance, and love fathers ... give us throughout life."^{xxvii}

Our current President has also made religious or spiritual references to Father's Day, as when his 2010 proclamation claimed that "From the first moments of life, the bond forged between a father and a child is sacred."^{xxviii} In 2009 he proclaimed that " Cradling a baby in his arms, a father experiences the miracle of life and an unbreakable bond."^{xxix}

So let's honor father and son today, along with father and daughter -- both theologically and in our everyday lives. There will be another day each year to honor mothers -- both

theologically and in our everyday lives. The important lesson is that of steadfast, unconditional love, which many of us know best on earth through our parents, but ultimately know best through the divine love of God.

NOTES

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- ⁱ Matthew 28: 16-20.
- ⁱⁱ *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. 2, p. 432.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 6:9 as rendered in the *Book of Common Prayer, According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), p. 54.
- ^{iv} Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).
- ^v Mark 14:36.
- ^{vi} Prescott Browning Wintersteen, *Christology in American Unitarianism* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship, 1977), p. 17.
- ^{vii} Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 169, citing II Samuel 7:14-16.
- ^{viii} Peter Calvocoressi, *Who's Who in the Bible* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 37.
- ^{ix} II Samuel 7:14.
- ^x II Samuel 7: 14-15.
- ^{xi} *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. 2, p. 433.
- ^{xii} Matthew 15: 3-6 and Mark 7: 10-13 as cited in the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), Vol. 2, p. 436.
- ^{xiii} Miles, *God*, p. 170.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ^{xv} Luke 3:38.
- ^{xvi} Matthew 5:9.
- ^{xvii} Matthew 5:44-45.
- ^{xviii} Romans 8:14.
- ^{xix} Galatians 3:26.
- ^{xx} II Corinthians 6:18.
- ^{xxi} Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2006), p. 70.
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
- ^{xxiii} Isaiah 66: 12-13.
- ^{xxiv} Chittister, *Search*, pp. 26-27.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ^{xxvi} "Father Finally Granted A Day", *Nashua Telegraph*, June 18, 1977.
- ^{xxvii} President Barack Obama, "Father's Day Proclamation," June 17, 2011.
- ^{xxviii} President Barack Obama, "Father's Day Proclamation," June 18, 2010.
- ^{xxix} President Barack Obama, "Father's Day Proclamation, June 18, 2009.