

## **Nobody ever asked me for a Father's Day sermon...**

Sunday, 21 June, ds. Don Mader

Scripture lessons: Hosea 11:9, Matthew 6:9-13

Over the decade and a half that I spent in Brooklyn, there was a bit of a ritual that developed. Each year, in February or March, as we would be discussing planning for the second quarter of the year, one of the members of the Consistory – the church board – would inquire what I was planning as my sermon topic for the second Sunday of May, and unless it happened to be Pentecost, they would discreetly add – for they understood that they could not dictate what the pastor's sermon topics would be – they would add that it would certainly be appropriate if I were to preach on a Mother's Day topic. The mothers in the church certainly deserved that recognition... And as I recognized that as a variant on the infamous 'offer you can not refuse', over the years I developed quite a stock of sermons on the topic of mothers – or at least women – including some that were quite subversive, like the text in which Jesus refuses to talk to his mother and family (Mark 3:31ff), and others that were quite general, for instance about the Motherhood of God.

But, you know, in all those years nobody ever asked for a Father's Day sermon.

Now, it is quite interesting to speculate why that should be. Were the men – for the majority of the church board were men – so secure in their patriarchal privilege that they saw no reason to ask for special recognition? Was their insistence on honouring women a sort of noblesse oblige? Or maybe guilt over their male privilege? Whatever the case, it is curious that in general, Father's Day has never been as popular as Mother's Day – nowhere near as many greeting cards are sold for it, and nowhere near as much money is spent on gifts for it. Moreover, Mother's Day is the older 'tradition': the observance was created in the United States in 1907, only a bit over a century ago, and Father's Day did not come along until three years later, in 1910, inspired by the success of Mother's Day observances.

Be all that as it may, there is also something that proved quite surprising to me as I began to research texts for use with this sermon. Even after all my years as a preacher, I had just assumed that calling God our Father was something that ran right through the Bible. But to my surprise, I found that the concept of God as father is not at all common in the Old Testament. God is referred to in many ways in the Old Testament – most of them male gendered: King, Lord, Lord of Hosts, Mighty Warrior, Shepherd – but never in a similar way called Father. There begins to be a hint of this in the book of Isaiah, for instance in Isaiah 63:16 (You, Lord, are our father; your name is Our Ransomer from of old.), and in the following chapter Isaiah, in a riff on God as Creator, says "But now, Lord, you are our father; we are the clay, you are the potter, and all of us are your handiwork." (Is. 64:8) But note, in both of these "father" is descriptive, not a formal name, as are "Lord", or "Our Ransomer". Aside from one passage in Malachai, where the prophet pictures God describing himself as a father, but still not the Father with a capital F (1:6), that is about all there is. There are also of course the two important passages read earlier in this service in which God is pictured as a father – we'll come back to those later – but nothing like we might expect, given the frequency with which we today use Father as a name for God.

From whence comes that frequency, then? Well, its from the New Testament, specifically the Gospels, and the teaching of Jesus that is preserved there. Most memorably, in fact, it is in the Sermon on the Mount, which contains the three most familiar examples: Jesus' model prayer, the Our Father, used likely by every serious Christian every day, with its opening address "Our Father, who art in heaven...", and two other familiar passages, including Jesus' teaching about not worrying about the provision of our daily needs: "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow and reap and store in barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them... Consider the lilies of the field; they do not work, they do not spin, and yet, I tell you, Solomon in all his glory was not attired like they are..." (Matt. 6:26-33) In the next chapter there is a similar but lesser-known admonition "Is there a man among you who will offer his son a stone when he asks for bread, or a snake when he asks for fish? If you, then, bad as you are, know how to give your children what is good for them, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to them who ask him." (Matt. 7:9-11) Jesus names God "Father" no less than 17 times in the teaching preserved in the chapters of the Sermon, and another two dozen times elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel. And the Gospel according to John, although it is quite totally different in organization and content, is in total agreement about one fact: Jesus regularly conceived of, and spoke about God as his – and our – Father.

This past week there were newspaper reports about the thoughts on this topic from another very major cultural figure – Albert Einstein. Twenty-seven of his letters are coming up for auction, including one where he discusses his belief – or non-belief – in God. In one letter of September 28, 1949, Einstein writes that while he is certainly not a crusading “professional” atheist, one could call him an agnostic – someone who does not feel he knows enough about God – to take any position on God’s existence or nature. He further explains to his correspondent that he does think that to identify God as a person is naïve; as little as we humans know about nature and life, it is rather presumptuous of us to be claiming any personal relation with God. Now, those are weighty words from someone who probably can be said to have known – or discovered – more about the nature of the world than anyone other than a handful of others. But what Einstein does not take into account is the fact – at least, I would claim it as a fact – that God has revealed himself to us as a person.

Now, I’m not talking here about ‘revelation’ in the sense that Jesus is the Son of God, and if He tells us God is our Father, then it must be so. To put it charitably, that is a circular argument. Rather, I am talking about revelation in the sense that scripture records the experiences of people who have experienced God as both transcendent – heavenly – and immanent – close by, and in relation with us as humans, and that we, at times, if we are open to it, can have the same experience: our experience tallies with that of prophets and disciples and saints, in all three of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This God reveals himself to us in a number of guises, which we translate into the Names of God: as Creator, as the Ground of our being, as a Protector and Provider, and yes, as Father, and sometimes as Mother. We call upon God as Father, not – or not merely – because Jesus told us to do so, but because we have at moments in our life felt or known God as a Father, in one sense or another.

Now, that we have not known our own fathers in that way ultimately makes no difference. One of the struggles that I had – and indeed, we had: the other staff at the first inner city church where I was an intern in the 1970s were similarly struggling with the issue – was the discovery of just how many of the kids in our youth groups knew their fathers only as an absence, someone who had walked out on them, or as someone who was present, but abusive – or worse yet, in the case of many of the girls, was sexually abusive. That led us to think seriously about how we talked about God in the Church – or at least not to use certain (male) god-language too easily – but also to the realization that most of these young people had enough conception, picked up from society, of what a father should be, to not only judge the behaviour of their human fathers, but to also to understand God as a good Father.

Nor does the fact that two of the three Abrahamic religions have been (and are to this day) uneasy about the concept of God as Father ultimately change this. Judaism has always been reluctant about bringing God too close to man. Even as it insists that God steps into history, chooses a people, hears man’s cry in slavery, it insists that God not be pictured as too much like man. Islam, coming after Christianity, backs away from seeing God as too much like man, and in fact specifically repudiates thinking of God as Father, as too anthropomorphic, as thinking of God as too much like us as humans. And there is good reason for this concern: when man starts picturing God in his own image, rather than seeing himself as created in the image of God, man and his religious practice are headed for trouble.

But on looking at the texts in the scriptures more closely, there is also an interesting difference between the Old Testament view of God as Father, and that of Jesus. The familiar passages from the Sermon on the Mount emphasize God the Father as Creator and Sustainer, and that is quite in keeping with Isaiah 64:8. But the two passages from the Old Testament which picture God as behaving as a father, rather than just calling God a father, have quite a different emphasis. We have used both of them this morning: in our responsive reading we used the lines from Psalm 103, “As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him”. The characteristic of a father is not so much the male prerogative to create and make things, as it is to be loving and forgiving. That becomes so much more obvious in the extended metaphor in Hosea 11. It’s a somewhat complex passage, so it may be worthwhile to walk through it again. It begins with God’s testimony to his love for the people of Israel – that is, the descendants of Jacob. As a child; it was God who taught Ephraim – here another name for Israel – to walk. (Now, we are already in somewhat strange territory here, because from all we know of the Biblical culture of that day, it was part of the mother’s role – and not the father’s – to teach children to

walk. Shades of God the Father/Mother?) Israel is God's son, called out of Egypt: but the more God called, the further little Israel toddled away, intent on his own course – a juvenile delinquent. So, God concludes: back they will go to slavery – and Israel can be lucky that is all, for the punishment for juvenile delinquency is death (Lev. 20:9). But then, suddenly, God repents of his judgement: "But how can I give you up, Ephraim, how can I surrender you, Israel? My heart is changed within me. I will not let loose my fury, I will not turn round and destroy Ephraim, for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst." It is precisely because God is God, and not like humans, that God, the All-Merciful, changes his mind – something which the Koran and John Calvin insist God cannot do. But God does, because he is the Father.

Not that this is absent in the teaching of Jesus, either: the prayer that begins with "Our Father" goes on to ask that this Father forgive us – as we forgive those who have wronged us. For Jesus, forgiveness, mercy, is also a quality of Fatherhood.

Every sermon has to have an application. What do we do with all this bit of scripture study on fathers? Well, first, for everybody, we had best be ready to look to God the Father for forgiveness when we make a mess of things in life, when we violate the moral order which God the Creator built in to life – and we can know that we will find that forgiveness there. Second, particularly for fathers (and males in general, whether fathers, or perspective fathers, or other authority figures), we had best begin practicing forgiveness. We often have this picture of 'mother love' versus the father as the stern, exacting, emotionally distant paterfamilias. That's a false distinction. Some of us were fortunate enough to learn this style of parenting from our fathers; others had to learn it from our experience with God the Father. That quality of understanding, pity, tolerance, forgiveness, reconciliation, is every bit as much a male, fatherly, quality as it is a motherly quality, and as each of us has – or can – experience it before God, we should extend it toward others, not merely our children, but all our brothers and sisters.