



FATHER'S DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, June 15, 2008

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Lection – Ephesians 6:4 (New Revised Standard Version)

“And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Father's Day is a day of national recognition, honoring, celebrating, and commemorating the contributions of fathers, past and present. It is a day to highlight fatherhood and the parenting done by males, including our forefathers. This is significant in an age when so many fathers ignore their family responsibilities. Father's Day is a secular celebration inaugurated in the early twentieth century to complement Mother's Day. It is celebrated worldwide on a variety of dates and typically involves family-oriented activities and gift-

giving to fathers. The gifts given often have slogans on them, such as "World's Best Dad."

This liturgical moment celebrates African American fathers and their lives and acknowledges God as a Heavenly Father who watches over his children and is always present. That is why one may hear sung on this Sunday. "Father, I stretch my hands to Thee, No other help I know." Father's Day is also an unfortunate reminder that far too many men are emotionally, financially, and spiritually absent in the lives of their children and their communities. Many men are even physically absent due to being imprisoned. In many ways, this day is a call for fathers to be present just as God is, especially in light of the reality of the prison industrial complex, and its impact on the African American community. Furthermore, this day can also be a time to applaud the men who function as mentors for many young people whose fathers are absent, thereby becoming "adopted" fathers to these youth.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Ephesians 6:4

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I honor and applaud good fathers. Their presence can serve as a substantive foundation to enable their children, and children of a community, to mature and become positive contributors to society. Unfortunately, in far too many instances, instead of honorable fathers, we have absentee dads whose lack of substantive parenting is impacting family life in our communities. Regardless of the statistics one uses, the presence of fathers in the lives of children in America is pitiful. In Philadelphia, PA, 70 % of new babies are born to single parent households. While single mothers are capable of successfully raising boys and girls, everyone knows that life works best when a good father is also present in the life of a child.

Violence among the youth in our communities and other stressors are a result of the absence of male/masculine love in the lives of children. The youth study center in Philadelphia reports that while young men are being incarcerated for drug offences, young girls are being incarcerated at a higher rate for violent offences! Behind all of this is a little child saying, among other things, "Where is my dad?"

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

While I believe that my tradition that banned women from pulpits and kept them out of significant leadership in the church and community is patently wrong, the part of this theology that highlights the distinctive role of male love and leadership still calls me to attention. There is something pivotal and powerful about the role of men in the home, church, and community; therefore, even though the chauvinism of my tradition must be challenged, fathers matter!

In this text, Paul specifically calls attention to the role of men and fathers in the lives of their children. He focuses our attention on the responsibility of men in the parenting process. This is quite the opposite of most present day parenting models. “Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath.”(KJV) First, Paul suggests that fathers have a mandate from God to participate in the process of parenting and producing spiritual fruit in the lives of their children. “Fathers.” Paul almost sounds like God when God came into the Garden of Eden and asked the rhetorical question, “Adam, where are you?”(Gen. 3:9) “Fathers, where are you?” Paul is saying mothers are fine and grandmothers are great, but if children are going to live life the way God intended, fathers must be involved. “Fathers!” This is a clarion call to men to recognize our unique contribution to the development of humanity. Yes, fathers matter.

“Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath.”(KJV) Second, Paul suggests that there should be something soothing about male/masculine love. Paul is clear that the way we participate in the lives of our children can calm or corrupt their spiritual nature. I do not believe that anyone would argue that the present state of violence and rage displayed by many of our children can be directly or indirectly traced back to the absence of fathers. A man in a boy’s life makes a difference. A man in a girl’s life makes a difference. What is fathering? Is it a particular impartation without which a child misses some significant part of the development process? I believe so, because fathers matter. In the book, Color Him Father, authored by Valerie Harrison and Stephanie Colbert, there are stories of love and rediscovery of black men. This book highlights the significant difference ordinary fathers have made in the lives of those who have become extraordinary people. Fathers matter!

Caring fathers have a way of giving permission to their children to excel by pushing them towards their greatness. I am walking in my destiny today because my father would not accept anything less but greatness from me. My father set a standard and charged me to reach for it. He was not perfect, but lived in the tension of his humanity and showed me how to deal with my own brokenness. My father made mistakes and taught me how to rise from my own failures. He walked with kings but never lost the common touch. He made it possible for me to conceptualize “The Father” because he was a strong benevolent lover of my soul. Fathers matter!

Third, the soothing love of a father points us to the image of God as Father. We know God as a loving father through the words and life of Jesus Christ and as Paul says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). This is the standard of love for any follower of Christ, any earthly father. A father who loves shows the ever present love of God, the Father. God’s love for us in Christ epitomizes love, a dad’s love for his children. Jesus even called God “Father” and prayed “Abba Father.” However, it is difficult to imagine a beneficent heavenly Father when your earthly father has not been present. It is difficult to trust the presence of a Father that you cannot see when you miss the presence of a father who you did not see. It is hard to trust that a father will be there when you need him when he was not there when you wanted him. Fathers matter!

When fathers stand in love the way that they should, and stand for what they should, they represent the image of a heavenly Father making faith and hope possible in our lives. It has been said that, “Hope is the ability to hear the melody of the music of the future and faith is having the courage to dance to it today.” My father tuned my ears to the sound of today many years ago, and I am walking in my season because my father pushed me toward it. My father spoke anecdotal truths to my spirit. For instance, he said: “Once a labor has begun don’t stop until it is done. Be the labor great or small do it well or not at all.” I am living my dreams today because my father once said, “He who learns nothing in his teens, knows nothing in his twenties, does nothing in his thirties, and has nothing in his forties.” I cannot be lazy today because my father would not let me sleep past eight in the morning even on a Saturday when I thought I had nothing to do. I cannot hit a woman because I never saw my father hit my mother. I cannot lie because my father was brutally honest. I saw him live with integrity. Believe me, fathers matter. Because of my father, it is easy for me to believe that there is a heavenly Father who “rules above with a hand of mercy and a heart of love.” It is easy for me to embrace the concept of a heavenly Father who makes “ways out of no way” because my father provided for me in the midst of a racist Midwest in the failing economy of Cleveland, Ohio. Fathers matter!

One thing is certain, if we ever needed fathers before, we sure do need them now. We need fathers who will recognize the power of male/masculine love in the lives of their children. We need fathers who will recognize the power of their words in speaking life to their children and setting the trajectory for their lives. We need fathers who will impart a spiritual heritage to their families and enable us to rise above the harsh realities of being African American in what Maya Angelou calls, “these yet to be United States.” We need fathers who will take up the mantle of parenting and push their children to greatness. We need fathers who will be like Christ and love their children to death. We need fathers. They matter!

Although we do need more of the type of father about which Paul talks about, I want to affirm that we do have some fathers who are standing in the gap. The media portrays the black family as being lost and without hope. The most pervasive images of black men are images of irresponsibility and violence. But we must not get overwhelmed by the media and overlook the brothers who are walking in their fatherhood with dignity and respect. They are rearing their children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” They are changing diapers, going to soccer games, watching dance recitals, going to PTA meetings, staying up ‘til teenagers come home, and paying child support when the unfortunate has happened in the marital relationship. There are some brothers who like Jesus are dying for their families, who like the Holy Ghost are comforting their children, and who like God are watching over their flock. Thank God for them because FATHERS MATTER.

Celebration

Thank God for fathers who have stood their ground under harsh circumstances, who even with hurting hands and sometimes heavy hearts, chose to love their children, rather than leave their children. Thank God for fathers who chose to impart wisdom, teach the value

of work, the need for integrity, the audacity of hope, the magic of kindness, and the ever ringing sound of love.

Descriptive Details

This passage, like many passages in scripture, provides few or no descriptive details. However, it is ripe with possible images that can be tapped into with a little homiletical imagination by any preacher, teacher, or worship leader. The following occurred to me:

Sights: Images of children who are sad, fearful, and beaten down by anger and wrath; images of children who are cavalier regarding violence because of viewing violence by men, images of children who are thriving and spreading good will because they were reared with love and integrity;

Sounds: Cries, screams, and the scuffling sounds of children marred by wrath; the sound of laughter, cheering and tears of joy from children who are nurtured to love God and to love themselves, the applause of children for their fathers, the applause of fathers for their children, the sound of fathers entering homes at the end of each day, the echoes of fathers praying in churches and homes, the sound of fathers as they nurture their children and teach discipline; and

Smells: The scents of ghettos filled with fatherless children, the burning smell of freshly fired guns by children who have lived fatherless lives, the stench of blood from the bodies of children killed by children of anger and wrath, the aromas as fathers cook barbecue in the backyard, the scent of cars being worked on by fathers, and the smell of the soap and cologne used only by dads.