

FATHERHOOD: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ²‘Honor your father and mother’ —this is the first commandment with a promise: ³‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’ ⁴And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

(Ephesians 6:1-4, NRSV)

Every now and then, people bring me clippings of cartoons. Usually the clippings involve a church setting, such as the Family Circus cartoon where the little boy sitting in a pew points to an usher coming down the aisle, and tells his sister that she better be quiet, because here come the husher. I love the one tacked on our office bulletin board that shows a guy with a beard and a long robe carrying a picket sign. The sign says “I was wrong about the end of the world happening yesterday, and apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused.” And then there are the cartoons that make me laugh at myself. That’s what I did the other day when I read the one depicting a harried father surrounded by kids. He says to his wife: “I don’t think I would have been in such a rush to become a father if I had known how much of it would need to be ad-libbed” (www.cedarlane.org/02serms). I identified with that. Although I’ve benefited from the modeling of a wonderful father and grandfather and have access to more parenting books than I could ever read, I often feel that I’m ad-libbing, making it up as I go along.

I also find myself looking at other parents and wondering how they manage to parent their children so effortlessly. Before Matthew was born, I remember looking at babies and thinking, “I could never change all those diapers.” And yet when the time came, I did what I had to do. At first I was able to change Matt’s diapers just the way the nurse in the hospital had showed me. Everything was very precise. But somewhere along the way, Matt learned how to kick and squirm, writhe and contort into endless shapes that made every diaper change a new and different challenge. The process of trying to pin that boy down was like football players trying to recover a fumble on wet turf. So I started ad-libbing. I’d bring along a toy to distract him, sing silly songs and make funny faces. At times I had to sit on the floor and hold him down with my feet while I changed him with my hands—whatever it took, that diaper got changed.

As he’s gotten older, I’ve continued parenting by the seat of my pants. You’ve got to think fast and be on your toes to keep up with these kids when they plant their little feet on the floor and declare they are NOT going to school, NOT going to clean up their rooms, NOT going to do their homework etc. etc. And so we wing it. We try to respond like we know exactly what we’re doing, all the while trying to keep our tempers in check and our yelling to a minimum.

Sometimes we do better than others. Have you ever wanted so much for your children to be serious for just a few moments so that you could communicate something

of deep significance and meaning, only to have them act up, miss the point, and ruin the moment? In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott describes the time she was trying to explain the importance of Ash Wednesday to her seven-year-old son, Sam. Much to her disappointment, she found that Sam was not at all interested in a meaningful conversation about the symbolism of ashes. This really hit home when right in the middle of the talk, Sam tried turning on the TV when he thought she wasn't looking. Lamott turned the TV off and told him they would not be watching any cartoons that morning. And then, as Lamott puts it, "...abruptly, hideously, Alvin and the Chipmunks were singing 'Achy Breaky Heart' in their nasal demon-[filled] way—on the TV that Sam had turned on again. And I just lost my mind. I thought I might begin smashing things. Including Sam. I shouted at the top of my lungs...and I grabbed him by his pipe-cleaner arm and jerked him in the direction of his room, where he spent the next ten minutes crying bitter tears." Lamott continues, "It's so awful, attacking your child. It is the worst thing I know, to shout loudly at this fifty-pound being with his huge trusting brown eyes. It's like...slapping E.T. I did what all good parents do: calmed down enough to go and apologize, and beg for his forgiveness while simultaneously expressing a deep concern about his disappointing character. He said I was the meanest person on the earth next to Darth Vader. I chastised myself silently while washing breakfast dishes..." (pp. 92-93).

What a universal description of parenting. Who among us has not at one time or another lost it? Despite our best intentions, we all have bad days, lose patience and yell at our kids in ways we never knew we had in us. Yes children should be disciplined. Yes raising our voices is often an appropriate response. Yes even yelling is appropriate when our children put themselves in harm's way or do something especially mean-spirited. But in those intense moments when our blood pressure sky-rockets and we see red, we could all benefit from taking a deep breath and looking deep into the eyes of these dear human beings for whom we would lay down our very lives if necessary. That's what will remind us to do what Anne Lamott did, to apologize, not for offering discipline, but for stepping over the line.

Parenthood is an inevitable mixture of the good, the bad, and the ugly. On this Father's Day, it's worth noting that the Bible is full of stories about fathers, good and bad, but most, like most of us today, a mixture of the two. One of the worst fathers was King Herod Antipas, uncle and stepfather of Salome. One day Herod threw a party and amidst the revelry asked his stepdaughter to dance for the raucous crowd. Tradition holds that her dance had more in common with the Dance of the Seven Veils than with the Hokey Pokey. Herod so enjoyed this suggestive dance that he offered to give his stepdaughter anything she wanted, even half his kingdom. Salome's mother, Herodias, convinced her daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. King Herod readily complied, had John the Baptist beheaded and his head brought into the party on a platter. What a disgusting story—a lecherous stepfather getting his kicks from his stepdaughter and promising her anything to make her happy, even the death of another human being.

While hopefully none of us have gone this far (and I feel sure I would have read about it in *The Manhasset Press* if you had), most of us have let our children do things against our better judgment just to make them happy, just to stop the whining. This makes us normal parents, not bad ones. At times like these, we're forced to ad-lib, forced to make a choice on the spot without the ability to figure out all the unforeseen consequences. We take a deep breath, consider the options, and make the best decision we can amidst all of the begging and pleading. The results may be good, bad, or ugly.

The Bible also tells stories about fathers who were far from perfect but also far from evil. Take Jacob for instance. It's not that he wasn't a good father to his eleven sons. His fatherly downfall arose out of playing favorites. Granted it would be hard to love eleven children equally. And all of us are prone to feel a little more kindly toward the child who makes our lives easy, as opposed to the one who makes life more difficult. But Jacob took it way too far, showering his youngest son, Joseph with gifts including the famous coat of many colors (or electra-color dream coat as the Broadway play called it). Eventually the other ten brothers had their fill of it and took matters into their own hands. They dug a pit in the middle of nowhere, stripped Joseph of his beautiful coat, and left him to die. Covering the coat with goat's blood, the brothers told Jacob that their brother had been attacked and killed by a wild animal. Unbeknownst to heartbroken Jacob, Joseph's life was spared when members of a caravan pulled Joseph out of the pit and took him to Egypt. Many years later Joseph and his brothers met up again. He forgave them and was reunited with his family, including his elderly father, Jacob, whose huge parenting blunder contributed in large part to the whole mess. Jacob was not an awful father or awful person, but he let his affection and pride in one of his children eclipse his relationship with the others.

Among the best fatherly examples in the Bible comes from Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son. The father in this story had two sons who were as different as night and day. The older son was the dream child, responsible and hard working. The younger son was the difficult child, a party animal who couldn't wait to get as far away from home as possible. The father exudes good parenting as he lets each child make decisions, make mistakes, and make amends. He knew the value of genuine love over pointless lecturing. Neither son was perfect, nor did he expect them to be. The father was wise enough to do the best he could with each of the children he was given. And that's all we can do as well—do the best we can with the children we're given. I have to say at this point that while the father is a great role model, we shouldn't let his wisdom, goodness, and generosity of spirit make us feel inferior. Remember that this father, unlike the other two mentioned today, is fictional.

In today's scripture lesson from Ephesians 6, the Apostle Paul wrote, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (v. 4, RSV). Another translation reads, "Don't keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful. Rather, bring them up with the loving discipline the Lord approves, with suggestions and godly advice" (v. 4, *Living Bible*).

On this Father's Day, as we reflect on our own fathers, let us give thanks if they were good and let us forgive as much as we can if they were bad. Let us also reflect on our own children and those who are like children to us. Let us pray to God for help in bringing up these children with all the love and wisdom we can muster. And let us do our best parental ad-libbing as possible, that our lives might reflect as much of the good and as little of the bad and ugly as possible. By God's grace may it be so. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
Edited by Colleen Brown Only
Father's Day
June 15, 2003
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, this day we pause to remember fathers. For those whose fathers have died making this day particularly painful, we ask your comfort and consolation. For those whose fathers were abusive or emotionally distant, we ask your grace and peace. For those whose fathers were wonderful and attentive, we give you thanks. Help us remember others who have been like fathers to us, coaches and teachers, scout leaders and mentors. For these too we give you thanks. Guide us that we might be good role models and nurturing friends to others, young and old alike.

And now to you O God, whom Jesus called Abba Father, be all praise, honor and glory. AMEN.