

Sermon on Sunday, June 21, 2020

Dear friends, listeners, church members

Someone said, "Relationships between fathers and sons can be complicated." How true! The first reading for this Father's Day service is a case in point. Did you notice how bitterly God's chosen Jeremiah complains? "You Lord, heavenly father, you deceived me, and I was deceived." He's clearly not happy. As a young man he had been persuaded to become a minister. It had not been his idea. Now, years later, he finds himself and his people in a state of permanent crisis. Powerful armies camp out in front of Jerusalem. People are being killed. Blood is spilled. The country is falling apart. And Jeremiah feels like he was pulled into something he wasn't prepared for. He says, "Lord, I didn't sign up for this! You tricked me! I didn't want this!" In the Bible, only Job is as honest in his dealings with God as Jeremiah. Jeremiah says: "The word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long..." (They don't show you that quote on a seminary brochure...)

Of course, ministry is there for good times and bad times, and maybe it is most important during the worst times. In our days, pastors have to tell people: no large gatherings, no choral singing, no touching. It will still be a while, people. Be patient, keep the faith. Hang in there... Meanwhile, jobs are being lost. People have died from COVID 19. The demonstrations and riots of the last weeks have opened ugly wounds... This year 2020 has a dark cloud above it. But remember, the dark cloud is a symbol for God's presence. You can read it in the Exodus stories! God is with us even when we feel like arguing and complaining!

Which reminds us that conflict is part of any relationship, even father-children relationships. Blessed are those who every once in a while wrestle with their dads! Sometimes arguing is a subtle form of love, don't you think? Give your dad some love!

Days like these invite us to reflect. How was or is your relationship with dad? I venture to say, as we grow older we start to see our dads with a bit more perspective. Those of us who felt at some point that our dads cheated on us, didn't spend enough time with us, treated us too harshly, made our life difficult and were sometimes not the best role models... as adults we begin to look at that with more grace.

As we grow older, we discover that we ourselves aren't necessarily great role models all the time; we find out how hard it can be to consistently do the right things; we gain a bit more insight into what it takes to be a parent; we see more clearly what our parents were up against. And that hopefully leads to a graceful view of those who raised us.

So here is my reflection. When I was growing up I didn't see my father very often. He was working all the time. When he came home, he was tired and not always in the best mood. As a consequence, I did not feel terribly connected to him. Later in life there was a mellowing period and the softer parts of his persona came out. He hugged more often. He smiled more often. He showed some more interest. And of course I started to see the bigger picture. Gosh, my father had started working physical jobs at age 14, and he often put in 14 or 16 hour days even before he reached the age of maturity. Young guys were cheap labor right after the war, they had almost no rights. When he finally got a union job at a steel mill with a regulated 8-hour work day, good pay and vacation time, he was 31 years old and had already labored in tough jobs for 17 years. So, he finally had some free time and built a house, most of it with his own hands. He retired early, at age 59, because they offered him an early retirement package. By then, he had already worked 45 years. Our relationship has much improved over the last twenty, thirty years. And I have gained great respect for the opportunities he opened up for me: to go to school and college with the freedom to choose what I felt was my path. He had no such choice. I owe it to my parents. My dad will turn 85 this year and I can't take for granted that I will see him again. So I pray that he will still be around next year when we hope to see him.

Happy Father's Day!

And please remember that Jeremiah's most painful moment in his relationship with God ends with a conciliatory note: "But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail." Don't underestimate dad!

Amen.