

**“NO BETTER BLESSING,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, Father’s Day, June 19, 2022, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor**

Today is Father’s Day, an occasion to honor dads. Although it is not a religious holiday, there’s nothing trivial about its spirit and intent. All Christians who remember the Fifth Commandment, reiterated many times in scripture, calling upon us to honor our fathers and mothers, should join in acknowledging, if not enshrining, the importance of fatherhood. (*Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16; Matthew 5:4; Ephesians 6:2-3*)

The concept of fatherhood is something that looms very large in our Judeo-Christian understanding of faith. Jesus, who imparted the Lord’s Prayer to us, encouraged all his followers to think of God as a loving father. Indeed, in his own prayer life he referred to God most intimately as “Abba,” an Aramaic word for dad. Jesus’ own relationship with God offers us an ideal of the rapport and love that should prevail in all father-child relationships. (*Mark 14:36*)

Of course, we human beings are not perfect. Even among people of faith, family relationships can be conflicted, troubled, and dysfunctional. A disordered father-child relationship can lead to all kinds of mischief. The Bible is actually pretty frank on this. In the Book of Genesis, for instance, we often see sons actually jockeying for the blessing of their father with one coming out ahead of the other. And older sons often don’t do well. Ishmael, the son of the Patriarch Abraham, loses out to second son Isaac, a younger half-brother. (*Genesis 21:8-21*) Along with his mother Hagar, he is then cast off into the wilderness of Beersheba. Not dissimilarly in the next generation, Isaac’s oldest son Esau is successfully defrauded of his father’s blessing by his younger twin Jacob. (*Genesis 27:1-40*)

Fast-forward to the era of Israel’s kings and we encounter the tragic story of Prince Absalom, one of the older sons of King David. All too eager for power, Absalom leads an armed revolt against his own dad in order to seize the royal throne for himself. To preserve the fragile peace of his kingdom, King David has no choice except to acquiesce in the assassination of his treasonous son. (*2 Samuel 18:1-17, 19:5-8*) David is tormented by the choice made. Who can forget his poignant lament over his son’s death: “O my son Absalom! My son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you—O Absalom, my son, my son!” (*2 Samuel 18:33, 19:4*)

David’s story underscores the heart-wrenching choices that dads sometimes have to make whenever children go off in directions that are not right, healthy, or constructive. Yes, fatherhood can be a cause for great pride and joy. But it can also be a source of great grief and tears.

One of the most positive examples of fathering is found New Testament. And it's a story of fatherhood based on personal decision, rather than biology. Joseph, a descendent of King David, is already betrothed to Mary when he learns that she is pregnant by means other than his own seed. He could repudiate Mary. Yet benefiting from the counsel of angelic voices he not only proceeds with his marriage to Mary but embraces her son as his own. (*Matthew 1:18-25*) It is Joseph's conscientiousness as a dad that saves Jesus from the murderous clutches of King Herod who commands that all newborn babies within his realm be executed so as to thwart a future rival to his throne. Joseph protects Jesus by removing him and his mother Mary to the distant safety of Egypt until the evil King Herod dies. (*Matthew 2:13-23*) In a fitting tribute to Joseph, Jesus is often identified as "the carpenter's son." (*Mark 6:3; Matthew 13:55*)

Significantly, one of the most compelling stories that Jesus shared in his own ministry is about a dad. Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son, also called the Parable of the Lost Son, describes a father so loving that he welcomes back a wayward son who doesn't deserve to be received, let alone feted, at all. (*Luke 15:11-32*) Jesus holds out this vision of a forgiving father as a helpful image in understanding God's love for us.

As I consider all the biblical stories about father there are three notable attributes of good fathering that stand out for me. First of all, fathers at their best protect their children. Second, they also prepare and equip their sons and daughters for life ahead. Finally, they bless their children.

In time everyone has to stand on their own feet. Yet early on, all children need fatherly protection to flourish. Children don't have the knowledge, experience, or skill to navigate on their own in the world. Their emotional and spiritual development can be harmed or damaged if exposed to too much of the world too soon and they're basically left to fend for themselves.

Have you ever watched any of the reality shows on prison life that are screened on television? Occasionally, I have. Most of the inmates profiled are grown men and women with the maturity of children. Again and again, these inmates report that there was never anyone "there" for them in a way that they could believe and trust. Consequently, they had to figure out on their own how to survive--mentally, emotionally, and physically. They are crasser and meaner for the fact of it without any deeper sense of self and worth. Where were their fathers?

A lot of young people get into trouble looking for fathers. Young women who don't have a strong father figure in their lives are more likely to get promiscuously involved with guys at an early age. They are also more susceptible to being used, abused, and manipulated.

It's not so dissimilar for young men. A lot of gangs are simply father substitutes. These gangs reinforce a sense of male identity and provide emotional, as well as physical, security. The high rate of incarceration of men in the United States – the highest in the world – is really a crisis in fatherhood. Not enough men are prepared to be good fathers, protecting their own offspring or other young people in our midst.

Of course, along with protecting their children good fathers equip their kids for life. Frankly, I think we used to understand this better. Indeed, up until the last century our whole culture was organized around the concept of apprenticeship, whereby sons and daughters were actively trained for life and work by their parents or other significant adults.

Jesus, for instance, was probably apprenticed to Joseph before hearing God's call and pursuing a different vocation as a holy man in the desert. Similarly, the apostle Paul was undoubtedly apprenticed to his dad as a canvas worker in the tent-making and sail-making business. I suspect those skills learned from their own fathers made both Jesus and Paul more confident as they faced the world, even if in more profoundly spiritual roles.

Today, the success of any child continues to depend on what a father (and mother) teaches him or her. My father taught me a lot by both word and example. Besides instructing me as to how to behave in public and private, he worked hard to make sure that I got a good education. Encouraging me in schoolwork, he insisted that I go on to college. He also took my brothers and me to church every week without fail. Making clear to us that the "unexamined life is not worth living," he never let us forget that truth, morality, and faith matter very much in life. He also taught us to respect women, which is perhaps why my wife and I enjoy the stable, loving relationship we do.

On a more humorous note I might add that my father equipped me to tie a tie. I was actually pretty slow learner. My father, who was a very natty dresser, tied all my ties until I was 21 or 22. For me it was an important father-son activity, which brought us closer together. But the day came when my father said it was time – past time – for me to do it myself. So he showed me how. Trained in this way, I have tied my own ties ever since – even though some of you sometimes have to adjust my tie-knots for me.

Every dad has the ability to equip a son or daughter in unique ways for life. I, for one, don't know how to change oil or spark plugs on a car. Yet I have met women who have been trained by their fathers to do so. Sometime back, one member of our congregation told me as a point of pride that she knew her way around the engine of a car better than any guy. It was all due to a dad who never wanted to see her ripped off by commercial garage. In equipping his daughter to be her own mechanic, her father was also teaching her the virtue of self-reliance—a virtue as sensible and honorable as any other.

I don't exactly know what was going on in the mind of Ethan Crumbley, the fifteen-year-old Oxford, Michigan youth who killed four fellow students and wounded another seven. Nor can I claim any greater insight as to the exact motives of the eighteen-year-old Salvador Ramos who murdered twenty-one children and adults and wounded another seventeen in Uvalde, Texas. But it's reported that Ethan Crumbley's dad early Christmas-gifted to his son the gun used in the horrific Oxford school shooting even though he knew that his son was dealing with some serious emotional problems. Meanwhile, by his own admission, Salvador Ramos's dad hadn't been in his son's life for months—and maybe even longer.

Rather poignantly, Salvador Ramos Senior said to the media: "I never expected my son to do something like that. He should have just killed me, you know, instead of doing something like that to someone." Although both sons obviously had minds and wills of their own, their dads are not without responsibility for the evil perpetrated. There seems to have been negligence—a failure to properly parent—on each dad's part. Folks, it really does matter how we prepare and equip our kids for life! It all starts with simply being present as dads for our sons and daughters—not just physically, but emotionally too with a commitment to teaching the difference between right and wrong.

Beyond being protected and equipped, all kids crave the blessing of a father. This is underscored by the biblical stories of Ismael and Isaac and Esau and Jacob which I cited at the outset. If you remember, Jacob actually resorted to a ruse in order to fool his father into conferring a blessing upon him over and against his favorite brother Esau. Meanwhile, Prince Solomon, the younger brother of Absalom, was more fortunate. His mother, Bathsheba, pled with his father King David on his behalf. (*1 Kings 1:11-31*) David subsequently recognized and blessed Solomon as his worthy heir and successor. Solomon would not have enjoyed the success that he did as Israel's most fabled monarch without the confidence that his dad's blessing lent to him. Even God forgave and overlooked some of Solomon's excesses because David's blessing was so strong. (*1 Kings 9:1-9*)

To bless our sons and daughters is to love and validate them. This means believing in their potential, honoring their individual gifts and talents, and wanting the best for them, whatever may come.

Unfortunately, blessings intended don't always stick or survive unspoiled. What I mean is that some dads set out to bless their children and end up becoming a curse and nuisance to them. Among the sadder stories is the saga of Henry and Edsel Ford.

In some respects, Henry Ford was a remarkable father. When Edsel was born, Henry was a hands-on dad when this was not so usual. He changed Edsel's diapers and bedding with a bottle as much or more than his wife Clara did. More importantly, Henry took Edsel

with him everywhere. While protecting Edsel from the worst of life, Henry was determined to fully equip him for the leadership of the enterprise that was to be bequeathed to him.

Later, however, Henry had a lot of trouble accepting that Edsel had grown up and had a mind of his own – with all the opinions that go with it. Edsel became president of the Ford Motor Company. Yet old Henry never really let him take charge of it. Executive decisions being made by Edsel were always being countermanded by dad.

One of the worst episodes involved a new building at the Ford Rouge Complex that Edsel had approved. When Henry saw it for the first time, he expressed surprise. Told that Edsel had authorized and signed off on it, Henry ordered the building knocked down, even though it was needed. In keeping with Henry's willful, perhaps spiteful, command, the building was promptly demolished without regard to Edsel's feelings or judgment. Impartial, objective observers thought there was something deeply pathological in the way that Henry treated his own son. Edsel's children, including Henry Ford II, later blamed their grandfather for the chronic ulcers their dad suffered and the stomach cancer that subsequently killed him at the relatively young age of 49.

Initially blessed by his father, Edsel led an extremely privileged and charmed life. Yet the blessing eventually faded, succeeded by a curse. The father-child relationship between Henry and Edsel Ford is one more cautionary tale for all of us. Dads need to let their sons and daughters be themselves, full adult persons in their own right.

Although fathers can and do make mistakes, it seems to me that most of us get it more right than wrong. And when we have made our mistakes his dad, it is not wrong to hope for the forgiveness of our children, who, hopefully, will someday have families of their own and discover that parenting is not so easy.

My own relationship with my father was not always smooth sailing. Yet I'm grateful to God that my dad was my dad, because he gave me more strengths than problems. What I mean here is that any shortcoming in our father-son relationship was more than made up for by what he positively shared and imparted to me. I was protected, equipped, and blessed by him. I am deeply grateful for it.

On this Father's Day, I hope that all the men of our congregation will find strength from their own relationship with God our Father to be the best possible fathers and grandfathers to the children and young people in our midst. Everyone needs a father's protection. Everyone needs a father's direction. Everyone needs a father's love and blessing. Apart from what God does bestow, there's no better blessing. **Amen.**