

GODLY FATHERING



Sermon 864

Trinity Sunday

June 15, 2014

950th Week as Priest

776th Week at St Dunstan's

41st Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is no accident that we know God first as Father. Jesus was asked how to pray by his disciples, and his response was to say, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” Thinking of God as Father may be antiquated or sexist in our enlightened twenty-first century, but the practice of substituting “God” for “Father” in the prayers and the liturgy sounds a bit like we are eliminating the First Person of the Trinity altogether. And that won't work ...

I think it is very important on this day of Trinity Sunday and Father's Day to talk about God our Father, but also to think about the role of earthly fathers and their good or godly characteristics.

What would you say that a father should be? Who among us would you consider to be a “godly father?” What kind of person is he? What does he do that makes him a godly father?

Abraham Maslow was the first psychologist to identify a Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow believed that a child’s behavior was shaped by the way their needs were met. First, physiological: every child needs food, water, shelter, clothing, and sleep. At the next level, children need to be safe. At the third level, a child needs to feel loved and accepted. The fourth level of need is respect and recognition. And the fifth and highest level of need is what Maslow called “self-actualization,” but it could also be called happiness, success, independence, responsibility, and a sense of purpose.

A godly father knows these things and instinctively works to provide for his children’s needs—beginning with their basic physiological needs. You can’t be a godly father if you’re a deadbeat dad.

Next, a godly father is one who provides security, care, and comfort, and his children are provided for on a consistent basis. A good father is one who blesses his children, in word and in deed. A good father maintains

an environment of acceptance, and home is always a place of blessing and belonging, of joy and the praise of children, of strength and encouragement.

These skills are basic and necessary for all fathers—biological and adoptive. They spring naturally from a spirit of good pleasure found in the company of children, and from a sense of grace, of generosity, and of graciousness in all that fathering has to offer children.

Next, godly fathering is focused on the here-and-now. Not the once-upon-a-time, or the maybe-the-next time.

Fathering is a lot more than just procreation—it is all about creating and maintaining an environment of faithfulness, or steadfast love, what the Old Testament calls *chesed*.

For me, fathering is essentially about sacrifice. This is what I learned from my own father, as well many of the fathers I have known during my life. In the fullness of time, Christ made the perfect sacrifice. Fathers, throughout their lives, make small unremembered sacrifices of their time, energy, resources, and selves.

Godly fathering is also about fostering and maintaining a spirit of thanksgiving—which is the meaning of the word *Eucharist*. And, fathering is about hopefulness and steadiness and strength and being open to God’s activity in your life through prayer and a genuine desire to learn and to keep on learning.

These are the characteristics that make a good father—not money, or a lot of the things that money can buy.

The chief work of godly fathering is giving, but not the giving of things. It is, instead, the special kind of giving that springs from a natural desire to protect the helpless, encourage the frightened, shield the innocent, and instruct the teenager. This kind of giving demands nothing in return.

Well, maybe that’s not altogether true. This kind of fatherly giving does demand something after all. Or maybe it only desires something.

This kind of giving desires responsibility in the child. It wants learning and growth to take place. This kind of giving encourages self-sufficiency, independence, good decision-making, and a spirit of respect and

cooperation. A father's giving goes without saying, but it almost always comes with a lesson—and at times with a little correction.

The lesson at Maslow's highest need level is this: Imitate me, as I imitate Christ. This is precisely what St. Paul told the people of his churches: Imitate me, as I imitate Christ. This is the unspoken command that every father gives his son or daughter. This ought to make every one of us realize that fathering is the noblest, most heroic work that a male human being can do.

One of my favorite poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was also a priest, wrote a poem entitled, "Pied Beauty," and the last lines of the poem celebrate God, the Father of Creation, and the creatures in his care: "He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change," said Hopkins. "Praise him." I believe with all my heart that good fathering brings forth the very best in children.

One of the great tragedies of life is that father who has not been an example of strength, hope, courage, confidence, correction, and care to his children. If this is your father or husband, I am terribly sorry. Perhaps along the way you have found—or will find—that good example of fathering forth in a grandfather, uncle, older

brother, priest, or other father-friend. But be careful: I would not want you to be hurt again.

But if your father has been a rock, a crag, a stronghold, and a castle to keep you safe, then let me encourage you to tell him so, and to thank him—in person if he is living, or in the Prayers of the People if he is--as my own father is---with the saints in light.

And if you are yourself a father, and you have not been this kind of Godly father to your own children, then let me encourage you to begin the most important work of your life. Remember that it is work that is accomplished in the here-and-now, not the once-upon-a-time or the maybe-next-time. Start fathering-forth today, with prayer and care and comfort, blessing and praise, courage and strength. Look to other godly fathers as good examples. There are many among us, and they are always, by their very nature, willing to help. It is their good pleasure to show you the love of Our Father in heaven, that you might become a godly father yourself. He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change. Praise him. **AMEN.**

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