

## God Is Our Father

Happy Father's Day! Today, we celebrate our fathers, grandfathers, and those who have been like fathers to us. At its best, Father's Day is a time for visits and calls, cards and gifts, and hanging out with family and friends. But, like Mother's Day, Father's Day can be complicated, enough so for Bishop Carrie to remind the clergy that, as Episcopalians, we are to walk the middle path. We recognize that, for some, Father's Day is a joyful celebration. For others, it's an upsetting reminder of fathers who have passed away, walked away, or didn't parent very well.

The Hebrew Scriptures are blessedly honest about the human failings of fathers. This morning, Adonai, who has come to regret choosing Saul, tells Samuel to anoint a new king. Samuel follows the Lord's instructions and travels to the home of Jesse, a man with eight sons. Jesse parades his seven eldest boys before Samuel, but Adonai rejects them all. The Lord wants David, the youngest, so the boy is summoned and duly anointed.

There are so many painful undercurrents here. The Lord rejects Saul because he didn't obey disturbing divine commands. Put in Saul's position, many of us might do what he did. When Adonai says he regrets making Saul king, he might just be angry. But perhaps Adonai is regretful because Saul just doesn't have it in him to be the king the Lord wants for his people. Any scholar whose disappointed dad wanted his kid to be a star athlete can probably relate.

Then there's David, apple of God's eye and the greatest king Israel ever had. He's a son any father should cherish. But Jesse seems to prefer his elder brothers, thinking so little of David that he doesn't even bother to call the boy in from the pasture until Samuel insists. Adonai favors youngest children – just ask Cain or Joseph's brothers. He certainly favored David. Yet we can still wonder if, just as his brothers might have been injured by Adonai's rejection, David might have been a little hurt that Jesse didn't appreciate him the way the Lord did.

We might also wonder why Adonai was so unforgiving of Saul's disobedience. Surely, the omniscient Creator of All knew who he was getting. Did he pick Saul to show his chosen people that a regal appearance didn't mean much? Did he want the young shepherd David to look better by comparison? Far be it from me to pretend to know the mind of God. It occurred to me while writing this sermon, however, that our Lord plays a very long game indeed. We don't know how many years Saul ruled over Israel – the numbers have literally been erased from the text. We do know that Saul came to the throne as a young man and ruled long enough for his son to grow up and fight in his army. David might not even have been born when Saul first became king; he certainly would have been far too young to assume the throne. With the people demanding a king, however, someone had to fill the role until David could grow into his destiny. And what a destiny it was! As the prophecies foretold, David was to be the seed from which a great dynasty would spring, culminating in the birth of the greatest of kings, the King of Kings, our Messiah, and Adonai's only begotten Son.

That leads to our Gospel. Jesus tells the crowd two parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. The Parable of the Growing Seed, unique to Mark, echoes the Parable of the Sower but isn't the same story. The Sower flings seed in every direction. The farmer here just plants the seed, and it grows until it's ready for harvest. The first parable places more emphasis on growth than the second, better-known Parable of the Mustard Seed, which is more about beginnings and endings. In it, Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to a tiny mustard seed that, when planted, matures into the largest of all shrubs. Both parables teach that the Kingdom of God grows to enormity from tiny beginnings with very little human effort involved.

For those of us who devote ourselves to the work of the church, these parables can be discouraging. Why wear ourselves out with all that preaching and teaching, all those good works

and community outreach, if God doesn't need our help to bring in the Kingdom? Well, maybe God doesn't need our help, but it helps us to help God, and the Holy Spirit is gracious enough to invite us in. People can get ourselves into all kinds of trouble, but we can be pretty confident that it will be good trouble so long as the Holy Spirit is guiding our efforts.

There's more good news. In his commentary on the first parable, Pope Francis points out that God works wonders from very tiny beginnings. He writes, "God surpasses all our expectations and constantly surprises us with his generosity. He makes our efforts bear fruit beyond all human calculation." It's our job to plant the seed, and we don't see immediate results. But, as Bible scholar Lamar Williamson Jr. observes, "in the end we shall marvel, as a sower at harvest. Growth and change occur while we sleep, we know not how."

So, what does all this have to do with fathers? Pope Francis also observes that "God's word is unpredictable in its power." God is at work in the world in ways that we can't fully understand and that often differ from what we think we want. I suspect he goes to considerable lengths to put us in situations that may be uncomfortable but give us maximum opportunities to serve and to grow. Jesse never got to see his firstborn on the throne of Israel, but he did get to see his youngest son, David, become God's handpicked king and founder of a divine dynasty. Saul didn't get to be a great king. He made a lot of mistakes and endured a lot of suffering. But he did get to be Israel's first king, and he got to prepare the way for a greater king to come, just as David got to prepare the way for the greatest king of all. If you believe in the afterlife, David and Saul have both had thousands of years to reflect on the roles they played in God's magnificent story. Any regrets or resentments they once had are probably long gone by now.

As parents, children, or both, we've all had some experience of fatherhood. Fathers are fallible, and sometimes they really mess up. If you've suffered abuse or abandonment by your

father, this may be a difficult day and I'm sorry for your pain. But if you're blessed to have had or to have been a good dad, celebrate the successes and let the rest go as best you can. Only God is perfect, and even he doesn't explain himself anywhere near as clearly as his children might like. It's easier to be grateful for the love and care we've received if we can put aside our fantasies and accept our fathers, grandfathers, and children as they are, imperfect but precious people brought into our lives by the wild, wonderful grace of our Creator.

And we need to remember that our human fathers are not our only fathers. We are also children of our Father in heaven, and our heavenly Father always loves us exactly as we are. We may not always understand what he's doing for us, but we can count on him to take whatever little seeds of goodness we sow and grow them into something vast and splendid. We can trust him to surprise us with unexpected blessings and grand adventures, if we're brave enough to take them. And we can thank him for the gifts that we have received from our human fathers, grandfathers, children, and those who have been like fathers to us.

Most of all, we can thank our Father for the blessings that he pours over all of us throughout our lives. As Williamson writes, Jesus's parables draw attention to "the mystery and miracle in commonplace activities and events ... the teaching of Jesus invites us to see and to hear God in the familiar rounds of daily life and in familiar texts like [these] ... to sit still and contemplate quietly until the commonplace wakes our minds and hearts to wonder." However you celebrate Father's Day today, my prayer for you is that you will find a quiet moment to notice and give thanks for the love of our Father in Heaven and the tiny, miraculous blessings of our everyday lives, especially the love of everyone who has ever been a father to you or to whom you have ever been a father here in earth. From such blessings of love, be they as small as a mustard seed, the Kingdom of Heaven grows. Amen.