

## FATHER OF FATHERS

Jesus once told a group of Sadducees that in the resurrection, people would neither marry nor be married. Neither would we die, He said, but we would be equal to the angels. We would be children of God because we are children of the resurrection. (Luke 20:34-36)

That one incident introduces us to quite a few themes of great theological weight and merit. But way down from there – by comparison, not hardly worth mentioning – are some practical little details that have always fascinated me. Like what happens to me and Mariana? (Or to you and your mate?) Last week we celebrated our thirty-first wedding anniversary. Granted, that is a far cry from eternity. On the other hand, does the passage mean that in heaven we lose each other or are no longer special or close to each other?

Jesus did not go into much detail, but I get very interested when He talks because I believe He really knows. Now, I get as frustrated as the next person, at times, by all the rules and traditions and restrictions. But from what I have seen so far, life without them is a good deal worse than life with them. So it bothers me to be told that in the resurrection, there is no marriage. I am not sure what that means, but I suspect it means I had better get more serious about learning love and how to relate to another being because in heaven, it's going to take more than a house or kids or a piece of paper to keep somebody near me. Isn't that scary?

Again, I cannot be sure, but Jesus does seem to be saying that there will not be any children in the resurrection. We will not die, so we probably will not be born either. And that always makes me wonder why the Creator put such emphasis on children in this realm we are in. Does that ever fascinate you like it does me? I see the necessity for self-contained experience here – a place of relative free will and so forth. But is this our first experience? Is this for openers? Or maybe this is like “solitary confinement,” and God says to the angels: “Keep on your toes now and keep in harmony with my ways, or I will stick you in a body and drop you down on earth for a refresher course in the basics.” In that case, we are all doing time here for some kind of insubordination. That would explain a lot!

On the other hand, maybe this is a reward. What do *we* know? If it is and I ever find out about it, I am definitely going to become a Buddhist. Nevertheless, with insufficient information and our kind of mind, we can come up with endless scenarios. What we do know is that most of us who come to this realm – however we get here – experience a time when we are children under parents, and a great many of us experience a time when we are parents set over the growth and welfare of children. If you believe in an intelligent, caring God, that has to be fascinating. Why would God put such emphasis on this theme?

Apparently there is something so significant about children and parenting that God wants most of us to experience it from at least two angles. At a minimum, we can surmise that our experiences as children and our experiences as parents are really a pre-planned, carefully designed way to teach us not only the rudiments of what it means to be children under God, but a little of what it's like from God's side of the relationship too – a way to get true understanding.

Back here in the daily round of life as we experience it, we usually think of it as a normal thing: we get married, we have kids, and that leads into a whole series of big and little decisions, crises, joys. Just because it happens with us and all around us all the time, we get to thinking it's "natural" or "common" or something like that. We forget that at every moment, we are also into profound mystery trying to link us with the vastness of God Almighty and God's eternal plan. And it is probably good that we forget sometimes, or it might make the burden even greater. But if we forget it for too long or for too much of the time, we miss the very essence of what we are participating in.

On another morning we will talk about motherhood, but today I want to ask you: Is it possible to be a good father? To most of the men I have known over the years, it has been very important to be a good father. And most of the men I know feel a lot of consternation and even guilt about how they have lived up to their visions of what kind of fathers they want to be. If attacked on the subject, they would probably defend how hard they have tried. But sitting quietly and musing, it's an elusive thing to be a good father.

And then it seems like some kids come out wonderful no matter what you do to them. And with other kids, the reverse seems equally true. Individuals come into this world with more agenda than we want to admit. They come "already made" in some very fundamental ways.

Our parenthood may be profound, but heredity (as we think of it) is only the upper layers of personality.

That makes the question different. Is it *possible* to be a good father? With some kids, you almost cannot miss. They start out wiser than their parents and keep one jump ahead all the way. And they are loving and appreciative to boot. With others, sometimes in the same family, there just does not seem to be any approach that will help. But the terrifying thing is that none of us can ever really be sure when the whole picture will reverse. When do you decide? At what age do you take a snapshot and say, “This is an example of what a wonderful parent I have been. Look at my child – successful, popular, responsible – here in this picture at age thirty-three.” What will the picture look like at forty-five? We may even think we know, but we never do. You and I have seen more than one despairing parent struggling, beyond all conscience or reasoning, with a perfect hellion at age seventeen. Then suddenly their child does a crazy turnaround, almost like they have found some vital missing piece, and they begin to train and learn and grow with a voracious and creative passion. All at once, the poor parent is being thanked and congratulated, including by the kid, and they do not have the faintest clue what they did right, any more than they could figure out what they were doing wrong before.

No, it is not always mayhem. There are trustworthy principles that tend to work most of the time: Be consistent. Be fair. Provide. Do not spoil. Spend time. Be affectionate. Show you care. Believe in them. There are lots of hints about such things in any bookstore. But it’s mostly mothers who read such books, and that’s because people who think like mothers write most of them. But let’s not get into that.

So the roles are changing, and the rules with them. And that’s no secret to anybody. It’s been going on for quite a while now. But change has a tendency to cut only so deep and then revert to pattern, if there really is one. What are some of the images you have of “father”? It will depend on your experience, of course, so this is not a true-or-false quiz. But let me remind you of a few majors.

PROVIDER / PROTECTOR. I do not know if this is a classic image of “father” in the minds of most women, but I can guarantee you that it *is* in the minds of most men. Women and counselors and many children talk a lot about how they would prefer love and affection or time and attention or feelings and caring in the place of some of the “providing and protecting” they have received from their fathers. Men hang their heads in shame, and sometimes they even try to change.

But it will not fly! Ten billion years of genes are not going to change their vote in exchange for a little current logic or a few tears. If you are the father, you provide and protect. If there is time left over for other things, that's dandy. But the greatest fear of the father is that he will not be able to provide and protect.

Lots of people think it was John Wayne who made men think this way – the macho image. But it was not. It was Billy Bigelow, and he still haunts our dreams. And behind that, a father *knows* that his primary function is not to be liked or approved of, but to provide and protect. In many instances, that's no longer working out in our society. But a father knows it anyway.

DISCIPLINARIAN / STANDARD SETTER / PRIEST. That is, carrier of the family ritual, tradition, heritage, ceremony, religion. This image of father is indeed much faded. The “oughts” and “shoulds” and “musts” are very unwelcome in our society. Many fathers no longer attempt to keep this role. But I often suspect that it has only gone underground. The other side of this coin is the father as teacher, trainer, mentor. To grow up in a home often meant, for all practical purposes, to be an apprentice to one's father. You remember *The Karate Kid*? Mr. Miyagi was often asked where he had learned this or that skill. His invariable reply was, “Father teach.” Why did that resonate so? Why did that strike a chord so deep for so many? Maybe some folk are beginning to miss it.

How many of you ever saw the movie *Bambi*? It's really crazy to show that movie to young boys in our society. It's going to do a lot more damage than carloads of sex and violence. There is the Great Stag. You do not see him often, except occasionally from afar. He is tireless, usually alone, always vigilant, always living only for the protection and care of the herd. However, there is one time you will always see him: when you need him the most. Then he is there for you, and no sacrifice is too great. Bambi has lots of cute adventures, but what Bambi really wants more than anything else in life is to grow up to be just like that Great Stag, his father. And every little boy who watches it feels the archetypal music coming alive and singing to him from the depths within.

A lot of fathers have faded out or quit. We have grown uncomfortable with the biblical passages that speak of discipline, remind us of the old roles, or use the analogy of God as Father. In real life, the perfect patterns are often missing and we have to do the best we can.

More and more of us are trying to learn to get along without fathers – without discipline, without the traditions and rules and goals that they represent ... and without the tyranny that sometimes comes with them. And the pendulum may be reversing once again. We are discovering that men who are afraid of women and children do not make good fathers either. Men who take on more and more the role of mother sometimes make good mothers, but it's no substitute for fathers.

What goes wrong is not that fathers act like fathers and so we have to wipe away that role. It's when the fathers forget the fathers – and the Father of fathers – that we get mayhem and disaster.

The experience of raising children is one of the great revealers of what it's like between us and God. We see in our children all the themes that are continually being played out between us and God: rebellion and adoration; fear and enthusiasm; trust and betrayal. We get to “see it,” sort of, from God's side. You punish your child, and you know for the first time how God must feel with us. When your child forgives you and gives you a big hug, you start to learn why God values repentance. When your child excels and your heart swells, you start to learn why God takes his hand away and makes us learn to do it ourselves. The parallels are endless.

So it seems that God wants most of us to experience childhood and parenthood in some way so that we become aware of some of the greatest themes in life. And I have concluded that it is not possible to be a “good” father. God alone is the Good Father. Nevertheless, two things seem absolutely imperative if we are to avoid becoming disastrous fathers: We must remember what it is like to be a child. And we must stay child to the Father of fathers. Each time we deal with our children, we must cling to the image of how God deals with us. Each time our children respond to us, we must keep realizing how it reflects the way we respond to God. Even when we feel like throwing away the rules, quitting, or putting aside all the principles we believe in just to get out from under the pressure, we must also remember how it would be for us if God walked out on us.

So we need to remember the Father of fathers, and we need to remember that we are still children. Sometimes the second is even harder than the first.