

Of Dads and Men
Proverbs 22:6
Matthew 18:6
Father's Day, June 17, 2007
First Federated Church
Peoria, Illinois
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Several years ago I received a copy of Bill Cosby's book, *Fatherhood*, for Father's Day. It has been a source of humor over the years. In one of his observations he writes:

I am never as happy as I deserve to be on Father's Day. The problem is my presents. I trust my family to get them instead of buying them for myself; and so, I get soap-on-a-rope.

In the entire history of civilization, no little boy or girl ever wished on a star for soap-on-a-rope. It is not the dumbest present you can get, but it is certainly second to a thousand yards of dental floss. Have you ever tried to wash your feet with soap-on-a-rope? You could end up with a sudsy hanging.

Of course, soap-on-a-rope is not the only gift that can depress a father on Father's Day: there are many others, like hedge cutters, weed trimmers, and plumbing snakes. It is time that the families of America realized that a father on Father's Day does not want to be pointed in the direction of manual labor. ...

Father's are good actors who lie well, (though). A father can sound convincing when he says that he is delighted to have another bottle of Old Spice because he is down to his last six.

A week before Father's Day *Time* magazine had an article about the state of fatherhood worldwide. Some of their findings were quite frightening.

- Worldwide, 10-40% of children grow up in households with no father at all. That statistic is higher in poorer areas—including our own community.
- In the U.S., more than half of divorced fathers lose contact with their kids within a few years. By the end of ten years, as many as two-thirds of them have drifted out of their children's lives.
- According to a Children's Defense Fund study, 46% of men default on their child support payment and only 3% default on their used-car payment.
- On the brighter side, fathers in intact families are now spending on average an hour a day with their kids. This is up from 20 minutes a day only a few years ago.

I recently had lunch with someone who talked about "fair share." By that phrase he was talking about "pulling your own weight," doing the minimum that is expected of a person. We weren't talking about fathers but his comments are applicable. By and large, we men haven't done real well living up to our responsibilities. The late Erma Bombeck

expanded our definition of fatherhood in a little piece she wrote about George Washington and James Madison. She noted that neither George Washington nor James Madison had any biological children, yet that each was called a Father—Washington the Father of the country and Madison the Father of the American Constitution.

Maybe fatherhood has nothing to do with a biological function. Maybe it's a generic term for someone who enriches and makes a difference to the lives they touch and are sorely missed had they never been.

In today's gospel lesson Jesus warns his disciples that they need to be careful of the examples that they set. *If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to those of you who are stumbling blocks.*

From his teaching I am struck by three simple yet profound truths about fathers in particular, and all of us in general.

First, whether we like it or not, whether we *want* to be or not, we are all role models. We are examples. We are being watched by others, even when we don't know it. The poet Evelyn Underhill once wrote:

*Little footsteps follow ours
As down life's road we trod;
How very careful we must be
To lead the path of God.*

*How often we have seen ourselves
Reflected in things they've done;
Our children imitate us
In more little ways than one.*

*How often little mouths repeat
Some hasty word we've said,
How closely we must guard our lips
That they are rightly led.*

*No, ours is not an easy task
Our little ones to guide;
If they're to grow up good and strong
And with our Master to abide.*

The play *All My Sons* is about a father who is caught in some rather unethical business dealings. As the truth comes out the father and his sons drift farther and farther apart. Finally, in an act of exasperation, the father says to one of his sons, "Son, I'm no worse than anybody else." The child thought about those words before replying, "I know, Dad, but I thought you were better."

We are examples.

Second, in Life we never know when something is going to take on major proportions. Our children often remember the smallest thing that we completely forgot about. Not only that, the seemingly small thing is of great importance.

In the late 18th and most of the 19th century the Adams family was as close to a dynasty as America had. From this family tree came two presidents, John and John Quincy Adams, as well as ambassadors, authors and educators. As a young man, Brooks Adams imitated his literary father Charles Francis Adams by keeping a diary. One day the father and son went fishing and in his diary that night Brooks Adams wrote, *Went fishing with my father today, the most glorious day of my life.*

When Brooks was an adult his father died. As he was going through his father's things Brooks happened upon his father's journals, and remembering that wonderful boyhood experience he was curious what his father wrote on that same day. He found the journal and turned to the date. In his father's hand he read, *Went fishing with my son, a wasted day.*

Charles Francis Adams never knew how wonderful that day really was.

Third. Years ago I read a wall hanging that said *Children spell LOVE T.I.M.E.* As a young father people talked about "quality time." Well, it struck me that you cannot have *quality* time without also having some amount of *quantity* time. You can't come home and say, "Okay, for the next hour we will have *quality* time." Quality time happens serendipitously. It cannot be planned. It is a moment of grace.

In the book *The Value of a Man*, the forty year old author wrote about a childhood experience.

I was just 12 when my Boy Scout troop planned a father/son camp out. I was thrilled and could hardly wait to rush home and give my dad all the information. I wanted so much to show him all I'd learned in scouting, and I was so proud when he said he'd go with me.

The Friday of the camp out finally came, and I had all my gear out on the porch, ready to stuff in his car the moment he arrived. We were to meet at the local school at 5 o'clock and carpool to the campground. But Dad didn't get home until around 7.

I was frantic, but he explained how things had gone wrong at work and told me not to worry. We could still get up first thing in the morning and join the others. After all, we had a map. I was disappointed, of course, but I decided to make the best of it. First thing in the morning, I was up and had everything in his car while it was still getting light, all ready for us to catch up with my friends and their fathers at the campground. He had said we'd leave around 7 am but he didn't get up until 9:30.

When he saw me standing out front with the camping gear, he finally explained that he had a bad back and couldn't sleep on the ground. He hoped I'd understand and that I'd be a "big boy" about it...but could I please get my things out of his car? He had several commitments he had to keep.

Just about the hardest thing I have done was to go to the car and take out my sleeping bag, cooking stove, pup tent and supplies. And then, while I was putting my stuff away and he thought I was out of sight, I watched my father walk out to the garage, sling

his golf clubs over his shoulder, throw them into the trunk and drive away to keep his “commitment.” That’s when I realized my dad never meant to go with me to the camp out. He just didn’t have the guts to tell me.

How do you recalibrate a child’s heart after it has been damaged by a dad’s broken promise?

A few years ago when Sarajevo was exploding with ethnic cleansing a photo journalist saw a man carrying a bleeding boy in his arms, ducking from one building to the next, making his way toward a hospital. Something inside the journalist made him call to the man. The two hopped inside of the journalist’s car and sped to the hospital. The journalist could see that the boy was badly injured, no doubt caught in the crossfire. Once at the hospital the boy was placed on a gurney. The doctors examined him and then told the man that the boy was dead. The man began to weep and the journalist took him into his arms and hugged him. Finally the man regained his composure and said, “I have to find the boy’s parents.” The journalist was surprised. “But I thought that he *was* your child?” Looking down at the dead boy the man replied, “He was.” And then looking out onto the street he continued, “They are *all* our children.”

They are *all* our children.

Whoever welcomes a child in my name, welcomes me. ... Be careful lest you put a stumbling block into the path of one of these little ones and make them stumble, fall, sin. For if you do, it would be better for you to place a millstone around your neck and be thrown into the deepest part of the sea.

To God be the glory.