

En el nombre del Padre, y del hijo, y del espíritu Santo.

This sermon was written in the knowledge that it would be delivered on the one year anniversary of the too-soon death of Dave, who reared five brilliant and compassionate daughters (one of whom is a close friend), but who was a father to many many more who met him. Dave was one of the best fathers I've ever had the privilege to know, and this sermon is as much for him as for all of us.

St. Joseph, I imagine, intended to be a father. But surely neither intention nor imagination could have prepared him for the circumstances under which he would become a father for the first time. And yet, a father he became, not through an incident of biology, but through love, obedience, and willingness. Though Joseph is not typically associated as the patron saint of fathers, I can think of no better candidate. Joseph encountered an unfathomable situation, and rose to the occasion to become the temporal father (we presume) that Jesus needed. In today's short passage, Joseph rather quietly goes through three distinct states. First, he was simply engaged. We don't know precisely what their relationship was like, but when he discovered this unusual thing, that his betrothed was pregnant, his first instinct was kindness. "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." Even without the vision that would soon follow, his instinct was to protect Mary, and to shield her from the public condemnation, possibly violent, that would otherwise have followed.

Then of course the angel did appear to him, and told him that no form of betrayal had happened. And then "When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife." Thankfully, I have had occasion to hear many beautiful stories of Mary's obedience to the alarming annunciation that she was to carry Godself within her own body. Joseph's compliance is of a much different sort, and still so worthy of mention. Joseph was asked to raise a child that was not his, because the work is important. He became a father in an unusual way, and he accepted the words of the vision with grace and obedience.

Fathers do become fathers in all manner of ways, and what we can learn from Joseph is that it matters less how you've come to be in a caretaking position than that you do take care. Though I do myself have a "temporal father," I have also been blessed with any number of adopted fathers in my life, some for a limited time as occasions arose, and some who are in one way or another still watching over me. Two brief examples: When I was bullied in Junior High, our large common lunch

room became a site of horror for me. My band teacher opened up his band room for students to practice over the lunch hour, and nearly every day for four years, I ate my brown bagged lunch in the band room with my teacher, which shielded me from a junior high experience that might have been, I now understand, far worse. He wrote me a message on facebook, of all things, a few months ago, and I recalled that gift he gave me to him and he acknowledged that it was by design. Over his 25 odd years at the Philippa Duke Schuyler school, he said, many students had sought the lunchtime refuge that he provided.

But perhaps the one who stands out in my mind most is Steve. I do not know his last name, and I do not remember his face. In 2004, when I was 28, and quite old enough not to need a father, thank you very much, I went on a zodiac ride on the tidal bore on the Shubenacadie River in rural Nova Scotia. An impish catastrophe of physics ended up throwing me into the air, where I came down on my locked left elbow to a resounding crack. Suffice to say I nearly obliterated my left arm. It. Hurt. And I curled up sobbing on the the floor of the boat, in as much pain as I'd ever been in. We were 35 minutes from the dock, and another 15 minute hike until we could even get to a phone—landlines only in 2004 rural Nova Scotia!—and call an ambulance. And that whole Steve held my hand, focused my attention, and told me that everything was going to be okay. We'd never met before that day, and I never saw him again. But he was as much a father to me in that moment as if an angel of the Lord had appeared to him to instruct him to be one. When I asked him, prior to being bundled into the ambulance, how he knew what to do, he simply replied, I just imagined what I'd do if you *were* mine.

We heard yesterday about the beauty of the spirit of adoption (Rom 8:15), and I am all for fathers, and father substitutes and I hold a firm believe that fathers come in all shapes and sizes and biologies—a high school girlfriend of mine is now the father of two—and they can come to us, when we least expect them, whether they are biological relations or not.

But this paternal love-fest comes with a caution. When we encounter new fathers, or when we find someone we think is in need of one, we must face head-on the difference between a spirit of adoption, of fatherhood, and paternalism. Sometimes each of us needs someone to be our rock, a crag to keep us safe, and I hope each of us can be the rock for someone else at some point, but this impulse misses the mark entirely when it smothers, rather than empowers, when it talks down, rather than raises up. To be a father to someone should never infantilize. The desire to be the rock

for someone can slide so easily into the desire to “do good” for someone or to “improve them”, whether or not that is the good they need. The desire to pick someone up by your own strength can be good, but usually only on very bad days, days when someone is curled up and sobbing at the bottom of a wet zodiac. To intervene in someone’s life when there is no evidence they need your assistance, or to use your own strength to restrict the freedom of someone else for their own good or because you, and not they, have their best interests at heart—that is paternalism, not fatherhood. And It is a risk not only run by individuals, as a church, we have engaged in this far, far too often.

So, let us take for our models no paternalistic do-gooders, but instead turn to God, who, in ensuring that God’s incarnate self had a living, breathing, temporal father, gave us a beautiful example of the care that we can offer, of the ways we can share God’s love, when someone in need of care crosses our path.

Amen.

Gospel for St. Joseph’s Day: Matthew 1:18-25



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