

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Fifth Sunday of Easter- May 9, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 67 & Leviticus 19:1-3

WHO NEEDS THEM?

Here are some answers given by elementary school children to questions about their parents:

Question: Why do we have mothers?

Answer: She's the only one who knows where the Scotch tape is.

Question: Who's the boss in your house- your Mom or your Dad?

Answer: My Dad says he wears the pants in the family, but Mom always tells him which ones to put on.

Question: What kind of little girl was your Mom?

Answer: My Mom has always been my Mom and none of that other stuff.

Question: What's your Dad's favorite saying?

Answer: I don't know, but one thing my Mom says he'll never say is, "I'm lost."

Question: If you could change one thing about your Mom and Dad, what would it be?

Answer: They have this weird thing about me doing what they say. I'd get rid of that.

Today in our wider society we celebrate Mother's Day. Next month in our country we'll celebrate Father's Day. In our United Church of Christ, today is the Festival of the Christian Home and in celebrating it this morning I want to highlight the place of mothers and fathers in our families.

I know it would be easy to get all gushy and sentimental about this, but I also know that wouldn't fit for all of us. The topic of parents whether on days like the Festival of the Christian Home, Mother's Day, Father's Day or any other time isn't necessarily a happy one for everyone. Some of us have lost one or both of our parents or the spouse or partner with whom we've been parents and we miss them terribly. Some of us, as parents, have had children we've lost and we miss them terribly. Some of us have wanted to be parents, but have not had children and grieve that fact. And some of us have had or still have strained relations with one or both of our parents that bring us wicked pain. These are all heavy hurts that we can especially feel on days like this.

That's why on the Festival of the Christian Home and on Mother's and Father's Days, I think the reality of parenthood begs to be put into a larger and deeper perspective than we usually can fit onto a greeting card. In the church, that perspective can come by using this day both to lift up our mothers and fathers and to look through and beyond them to the God who is heavenly father and mother to us all. At memorial services and funerals we often read these Scriptures:

From Psalm 103, "As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who are his". And from Isaiah 66, "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you" (says the Lord).

In our second Scripture reading this morning from the book of Leviticus, we also read, "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my Sabbaths: I am the Lord your God."

The Lord who is our heavenly, compassionate, and comforting mother and father calls on us to revere our earthly fathers and mothers, too. But then God ties that reverence to the further command that we

keep God's Sabbath. What is that about? I think it's a crucial connection that gives us the larger and deeper perspective we need to understand what it really means to be parents and children.

It reveals this fundamental fact: mothers and fathers don't need Mother's Day or Father's Day. They don't need to be highlighted and celebrated on the Festival of the Christian Home. It *is* a good thing to have such days to give our parents special attention and thanks, but for them, as Moms and Dads, these days are *not* necessary. People don't become mothers and fathers so that they'll be celebrated for their parenthood. They become Dads and Moms so that they can train their hearts on loving and caring for their children. Loving and caring for their kids so that they grow up to be good, faithful, loving, and caring people, too- that's the big deal for Moms and Dads.

In that way, Mother's Day and Father's Day are like the Sabbath day. The focus of Mother's and Father's Days is on Mom and Dad, but it's not Dad and Mom who need them. Likewise, on the Sabbath day our focus is on God, but it's not God who needs it.

Then who does? We who are *children* both of our earthly parents and our Heavenly One- we're the ones who need these special days.

We need them to remind us that in the deepest sense we always are and always will be someone's child, no matter how old and grown-up we get. We always are and always will be children both of our earthly parents and our Heavenly One. We didn't give birth to and raise ourselves and we haven't come to faith in God and been nurtured in it by ourselves.

The Festival of the Christian Home, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and the Sabbath- all of these slow us down and help us to remember that no matter how adult, self-confident, self-assured, and self-reliant we may become, none of us comes into this world or makes our way in it by ourselves. We're all *dependent*.

We love to think of ourselves as *independent*. We like to believe that we make it all on our own. We associate being dependent with being un-free or with being weak, small, needy, and incapable. But the fact is that no matter how strong, smart, capable, and self-reliant we may become, we still are, at every moment, dependent on those who came before us and those who are with us now. This is especially true in the things that matter most.

Another of my movie references might help to make this point. In the film, *For Love of the Game*, a great but aging Detroit Tigers baseball player named Billy Chapel is pitching in Yankee Stadium in what could be the final game of his career. Through flashbacks we see the events that have led up to this particular moment. Earlier that day, Jane, Billy's five-year, on-again, off-again girlfriend, has broken off with him for good. In a final exasperation she has said to him, "Billy, you don't need me. You and the ball and the diamond, you're perfect . . . You can win or lose the game all by yourself."

The flashbacks show us the inner turmoil Billy Chapel has over his life off the field while on the field he's pitching a perfect game. A perfect game in baseball is one of the rarest feats in all of sports. It's one in which the pitcher records 27 consecutive outs. He gives up no hits, walks, or hit batsmen, and his team makes no errors. It's a *perfect* game.

And even though he's 40 years old and near the very end of his playing days, this is the kind of game Billy Chapel is pitching. He's started off brilliantly, striking out one batter after another, but as the game has gone on his arm has started to hurt- a lot. He prays to God for relief from it, but when he goes out to pitch the eighth inning he tells Gus, his long-time catcher and best friend on the team, "I don't know if I have anything left."

Gus looks him in the eye and says, "Chappy, you just throw whatever you got, whatever's left. The boys are all here for you. We'll back you up. We'll be there . . . We're gonna be awesome for you right now. You just throw."

Billy starts the eighth inning by throwing three straight balls. One more and he'll give up a walk that will ruin the perfect game. But now in his mind's eye, he goes back to his childhood and sees his father, whom he loved very much, playing catch with him and reminding him to be calm. That settles him down so that he throws the next pitch for a strike.

The one after that is different. The batter crushes it to deep right-center field and it looks like it's going to be a home run. But the center fielder, Mickey Hart, leaps to the top of the wall, reaches over, and makes a *spectacular* catch.

It turns out that the old catcher, Gus, is right. The boys are there for Billy. After this, they make one heroic defensive play after another to keep the perfecto alive. The second baseman makes a diving stop out in short right field to get a runner at first. The third baseman does the same behind his bag and makes a long, strong throw for another out. Gus ranges near the dugout to make a nice catch on a foul pop. And on the very last play of the game- well, I can't describe it. You'll need to see the movie for yourself, but suffice it to say- Billy gets his perfect game.

And yet, at what should be the peak moment of his professional life (which he has allowed to become his whole life), Jane's words haunt him: "You don't need me. You and the ball and the diamond, you're perfect . . . You can win or lose the game all by yourself."

Billy now sees how completely *untrue* that is. He and the ball and the diamond are not perfect by themselves. He can't win or lose the game, whether of baseball or of life, on his own. He needs the memory of his father. He needs the help of his teammates. He needs Jane's love. He needs God. He's not independent.

But it is such a strong temptation to think that we are or that we can be. We so easily forget, for example, that without our fellow human beings and without a huge bundle of God-given gifts from the natural world, we wouldn't have food on our tables, clothes on our backs, roofs over our heads, vehicles to drive, schools to learn in, jobs to work, or medicine to take. We wouldn't have so many other common, everyday things we usually take completely for granted.

Furthermore, we forget the most elementary fact that without our parents we wouldn't be here at all. We forget the plain truth that as human beings we're born so helpless that if someone else doesn't directly take care of us for *years* after we're born, we will die. Other mammals can learn to take care of their own physical basics within a few months, but for us it takes years.

Our parents are the ones that God calls on to be on the front lines in giving us this care. God gives us life through them. God calls on them to care directly for our needs year after year after we're born. God calls them to pass on, above all, the gift of faith- the ultimate gift through which we can eventually learn to live the life abundant that God wants for us most.

To which some of us can honestly say, "Well, my parents didn't do a very good job with any of that. They didn't plan or want for me to be born. They were erratic at best in giving me what I needed from them, even during the times I needed them most. They didn't pass on to me much if any faith in God because they didn't have much of it themselves to pass on.

And yet, we are here. We are alive and we do have faith in God, at least enough to be in this worship this morning. Maybe our parents haven't been the main ones who've nurtured us to the place where we are now, *but*- if it hasn't been them, then there are others who've cared for and are still caring for us. If it hasn't been our parents, then there are others who've passed on and are still passing on to us the gift of faith through this crazy quilt family we call the Christian church. If that weren't true, none of us would be here.

Now there's no denying that like our earthly parents, the church can fail us, too. Instead of faithfully leading and supporting each other in the beauty of God's life abundant we in the church can often mislead and take each other away from it. Our sowing, growing, and sharing of the Spirit's fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control can be weak and meager. We can let weeds of sourness and discord, impatience and harshness, self-absorption and self-indulgence take hold instead.

But just as it's impossible to come to life and to grow at all without the life and support of our parents, however flawed they may be, so is it impossible to come to faith in God and to grow in the life of the Holy Spirit without the life and support of the community of faith, however flawed it may be.

For the simple truth is that God has made us this way. We are dependent. We do need each other. The abundant life that God calls us to live is life *together*. The Spirit's fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control take their meaning only in a life that's lived *with* each other.

These virtues, in fact, grow best in our struggles to deal with each other's flaws and wrongs and imperfections. They're exactly what we need to help each other keep on keeping on in a world where all

of us still fall far short of God's ultimate intention for us. To think that we can grow in the love for which God has made us apart from other people who also seek, no matter how fitfully, to grow in that same love is a delusion. We can't grow closer to God by ourselves . . . which brings us back to why we are here this morning.

We who are always dependent, we who are always children both of our earthly parents and of our Heavenly One- we need these days. We need the Festival of the Christian Home, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and the Sabbath Day. We need them to remind us of how much we depend on each other. We need them to remind us of how much we need each other *in God*. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of all, today on this Festival of the Christian Home, we pray especially for our families. We thank You for our mothers and fathers, for our brothers and sisters, for our grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, for our husbands, our wives, and our children. We thank You for all who have been and are close, faithful, and caring companions to us.

We thank You for Your family of the church which assures us of Your unending love for us, for Your church which supports and guides us in our love for You and each other. Anchored in our love for You, we ask for Your strength to help us, especially as parents, to give our best to our families- our family by blood, our family through the waters of baptism, and our family of all people with whom we share our common creation in Your image.

Help us especially to care well for the precious gift You have given to us in our children. Help us as children to give our parents the respect, honor, and appreciation due to them. Help us all who ultimately are Your children to remember how dependent we are on You and each other. Help us in our mutual dependence to reach out to everyone with a love so open and free that the whole world will rejoice to know that all of us are kin in You. We pray this in Jesus' name and we pray as he has taught us, saying together, "Our Father, . . ." Amen.