

“Father Knows...”

As I said back in May I do not often offer a topical sermon, but I did for Mothers’ Day, so I feel it is only fair to give dads their due. However, the scriptures appointed for Mother’s Day were a lot more friendly to the preacher than today’s. Today no matter which cycle I looked at fathers and families did not come out looking so good.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus is on a rant or at least it seems so. I think it is more likely that Matthew took this moment in the Gospel to stitch together some of Jesus’ sayings. The Gospel writers were known to do this, especially Matthew. When he does not have a story to tell but he has sayings of Jesus’ that he likes he just puts them together to create something thematic.

Therefore, I am going to do something else I do not normally do and cherry-pick one line to get me started. That line is “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” This resonates with me because it sounds an awful lot like something my dad used to say. He said, “Study hard. Learn as much as you can. No matter what they do to you they cannot take away what is in your head. That is always yours.” My father was not a scholar, but he valued learning.

Our culture makes fun of dads. We have dad jokes, dad bods, and dad jeans, none of which are considered good. Most television advertisements feature a befuddled husband or father and the long-suffering wife or mother who must put up with him and set him straight.

Dads used to get blamed for being absent. The stereotype was a man who worked in the city, so he had to take a train to work. He worked long hours and then had to take the train home. He was tired when he arrived home. He plopped at the dinner table and ate mechanically without much communication. Afterward there was an hour or two in front of the TV before he was off to bed. No time for the kids. No time for his wife.

My siblings did not know the father I had when I was the only child. My dad played with me, building machines with the Erector set and houses with Lincoln Logs. He read to me. We watched sports together. Later we played football and basketball. We played board games. He was ultra-competitive, so it was hard for him to let me win. I had to beat him, which was exceedingly rare. As our family grew and he took over his family’s business our lives changed. He worked day and night as he tried to grow the business and bring in more income for our family. We saw less of him, but he did find time for us.

My dad was also a man of good advice. There was the line I mentioned earlier. He told me to keep money in your wallet in order, so I wouldn’t mistake a fifty for a five. Another bit of advice was coffee will stunt your growth. He told me this because I always wanted to drink coffee with him as a little kid.

He taught me skills. Such as how to throw a football or crack a walnut. How to drive a tractor. How to be a courteous gentleman to a lady. How to play golf. That I should help my mom around the house. How to ride a bike. How to chop weeds and prune shrubs. That you should wash a car from top to bottom and do it in the shade. Spray the wheel wells to get the dirt out. But he never could teach me how to tie my shoes. It took my uncle to accomplish that.

These are the kinds of things dads do. The best ones set examples, share wisdom, show love and care for their wife and the mother of their children, be available to play with their kids, and share their hobbies and interests with them. They also discipline their children, but without hitting. They love their kids, maybe not more than Jesus (according to Matthew, Jesus wouldn't like that), but love them so much that their children never doubt that dad has their back.

He should be a good enough dad that when he dies his children are sad. Many years later they still recall the special times and the plain times that were special just because they were together. For me there was nothing more special than just being with my dad. He was my hero.

As I did on Mother's Day, I will share two poems about dads. The first one is called "Ice" by Gail Mazur.

"In the warming house, children lace their skates,
bending, choked, over their thick jackets.

A Franklin stove keeps the place so cozy
it's hard to imagine why anyone would leave,
clumping across the frozen beach to the river.
December's always the same at Ware's Cove,
the first sheer ice, black, then white
and deep until the city sends trucks of men
with wooden barriers to put up the boys'
hockey rink. An hour of skating after school,
of trying wobbly figure-8's, an hour
of distances moved backwards without falling,
then—twilight, the warming house steamy
with girls pulling on boots, their chafed legs
aching. Outside, the hockey players keep
playing, slamming the round black puck
until it's dark, until supper. At night,
a shy girl comes to the cove with her father.
Although there isn't music, they glide
arm in arm onto the blurred surface together,
braced like dancers. She thinks she'll never
be so happy, for who else will find her graceful,

find her perfect, skate with her
in circles outside the emptied rink forever?¹”

The second poem is called “Not Forgotten” by Sheila Packa.

“I learned to ride
the two wheel bicycle
with my father.
He oiled the chain
clothes-pinned playing cards
to the spokes, put on the basket
to carry my lunch.
By his side, I learned balance
and took on speed
centered behind the wide
handlebars, my hands
on the white grips
my feet pedaling.
One moment he was
holding me up
and the next moment
although I didn't know it
he had let go.
When I wobbled, suddenly
afraid, he yelled keep going—
keep going!
Beneath the trees in the driveway
the distance increasing between us
I eventually rode until he was out of sight.
I counted on him.
That he could hold me was a given
that he could release me was a gift.²”

Dads are more than we and our culture often give them credit for. They are more than the jokes they tell, the pants they wear, and the bodies they have. They are exemplars to their boys and first loves to their girls. That is why God gave them to us.

¹“Ice” from *Zeppo’s First Wife: New and Selected Poems* by Gail Mazur. ©2005 by The University of Chicago.

² “Not Forgotten” by Sheila Packa, from *Cloud Birds*. © Wildwood River Press, 2011.