

Reflections on Father's Day©
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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Today is a national holiday, a day set aside to honor and celebrate fathers. I am grateful to the fathers who made it a point to be here this morning. I recognize that coming to church and listening to the minister share his thoughts about this holiday might be less appealing than a good number of other activities you could have engaged in today—activities such as spending the morning with your children and/or partner, being on a local lake or river fishing, heading off into the mountains for a hike or bike ride—or maybe even mowing the lawn. So thank you, fathers, for making the decision to be with us here today. My hope is that by the time you leave today you will be glad you made the decision to spend a portion of your special day here with us.

I find it quite interesting that Father's Day didn't become a permanent national holiday in the U.S. until I was in my 20's. The holiday was signed into law in 1972, 58 years after Mother's Day became a permanent national holiday. This quite recent designation is surprising when you consider that efforts to establish this holiday began in the very early years of the twentieth century. And other countries, along with some religious traditions, have had a day to honor and celebrate fathers since the middle ages. When I reviewed the history that led up to this holiday being put on the national calendar, I learned there was considerable resistance to its establishment. We might wonder what was behind this resistance?

In one article I read it was mentioned that some of the resistance was connected to the commercialization that had developed around the Mother's Day holiday. It seems there were some men who were concerned about receiving gifts they didn't want or need—gifts like neck ties they might never wear, fishing lures that would never get wet, or tools they had no interest in having or having to use. There was even a period when there was a movement to have a single day to celebrate and honor parents instead of having separate holidays, one for mothers and another for fathers. Eventually the resistance was overcome and today we celebrate father's in ways big and small, simple and complex, and personal as well as commercial.

As is the case for all of us, both Father's Day and Mother's Day are a two-edged coin. One side of the coin holds images and memories of our respective parents. The other side represents the parent we each are or might have been. The side that represents experiences with my father is elegantly engraved with memories and emotions. This side of the holiday coin offers me a time to reflect on all that my now deceased father did to assist me in becoming the person I am today. This side of the coin brings up feelings of appreciation and gratitude.

An experience at the grocery store on Friday made me very aware of the other side of the coin. The coin got flipped when an employee wished me a happy Father's Day. Since I do not have any biological children, this side of the coin is basically blank except for a few small marks and scratches. It is blank because I do not have any children who call me father—children who would have stamped their presence onto the face of the coin and my heart. The marks and scratches were made by the children of

other parents—parents who in one way or another made it possible for me to be a part of their children’s lives. As I reflect on this relative blankness, I wonder what might have been stamped on this side of the coin had I been a father to an infant, a young child, an adolescent, a young adult and a mature adult. I can only begin to imagine. These imaginings intensify my gratitude for my own father. These imaginings also make me even more respectful for you fathers who were actively involved in the lives of your children.

But these imaginings also make me think about those fathers who were not present in the lives of their biological children. Such is the case for far too many men. Some of those absent fathers, especially fathers of color, have been imprisoned for much of their children’s lives. And for far too many of these fathers of color their skin color played a role in whether they were incarcerated in the first place and/or how long their sentence would be. We must work to change that. Some fathers have been deported because they were in this country without the proper legal documents. Again, this is something that should not occur and needs to be changed. And some absent fathers have lost out on being present for their children for a host of reasons including such things as the demands of work, the ramifications of addiction, or the fear of commitment and responsibility. For these fathers, just like for me, one side of the coin is blank or nearly so. I feel sorrow for these men and for their children—children who didn’t get the chance to engage with their fathers to change his heart, mind and life forever.

Thinking about these absent fathers leads me to a question. The very name of the holiday, Father’s Day, tells us who we honor and celebrate. But I think it is important for us to ask ourselves what it is about fathers that we are honoring and celebrating. I believe we need to consider this “what” question because it can be and has been answered in a variety of ways throughout history and across cultures. Let me give you a couple of examples. In portions of the Hebrew Bible King Solomon is written about in glowing terms. To this day he is considered a major prophet in both Judaism and Islam. In some Christian traditions he is revered as a saint. The scriptures tell us that he had 700 wives and 300 concubines. The Bible mentions only three of his children, but it is almost certain that he had many, many more. And then there is Genghis Khan, the leader of the largest land empire in history. The Museum of the Rockies currently is hosting an exhibition featuring this warrior and leader. I was told by one of our Fellowship members who is a docent at the museum that Genghis Khan supposedly had possibly 1000 children or more. Today he is highly revered in Mongolia.

When I ask myself what it is I am honoring today it is definitely not some of the prominent aspects of these two fathers. I do not and will not honor and celebrate a father because of his desire and capacity to have power and dominion over any woman let alone as many women as he might so choose. And I do not and will not honor and celebrate a father based on his ability to propagate as many children as he possibly can. Fatherhood is far more than spreading one’s seed to propagate children. I wish I could state that the characteristics I just mentioned are not ones we celebrate or hold in high regard today. I wish I could say that but I can’t. Today there are still people, mostly if not entirely men, who think the kind of behavior these two fathers exhibited is not only

permissible, it is to be expected and admired. Sadly, we still have a great deal of work to do to change that.

So what characteristics and attributes will I honor and celebrate today? There are many, some of which have been mentioned earlier in our service. Our Chalice Lighting mentioned a long list of things—things such as providing for children, being a teacher and mentor, offering physical and emotional attention, setting appropriate and necessary boundaries, and giving children freedom, like when a parent hands over the car keys. The reading by Team Tony both agrees with and adds to what the Chalice Lighting includes. The reading stresses the importance first and foremost of showing up, of being present in a child's life. It goes on to stress the importance of demonstrating what it means to be of service, of giving love and caring, and of being extraordinary. I would like to read again one line that speaks to this last item, being extraordinary. "Being extraordinary is a choice, and to be an exceptional father figure a man has to make the decision to commit to that choice every single day." Being extraordinary means that a person gives the very best they have unselfishly over, and over, and over again. And there is one other thing that the reading mentions specifically that is important for us to keep in mind. A person can be a father of choice instead of a father of obligation. The idea of a father of choice relates directly to what the Chalice Lighting alludes to with the word fatherhood. A person can, and many people do, take on the role of father even though they have no biological children of their own. People who make this choice deserve to be honored today as well. There are other characteristics and attributes that could be added to this list but I think the ones I have mentioned are a good starting point.

As we think about this list, we probably all recognized that no person can possibly exhibit all of these things at just the right level and at the correct time. No one is able to do exactly what is needed or best in every parenting situation. Every parent, in fact all of us, falls short at times. When we are in a father role, or more generally a parenting role, we need to be willing and able to acknowledge that we are not perfect. And once we acknowledge our imperfection, we can take the steps that are needed in any relationship to keep it healthy, strong, and growing. These steps include admitting our mistakes, being willing to make amends, asking for forgiveness, and, when appropriate or necessary, to seek help. Regarding this last item, seeking help, I would assert that it is important for all of us to challenge the cultural norm or expectation which was mentioned in our Chalice Lighting—the expectation that men are supposed to have all of the answers. I have come to believe that this expectation is not beneficial to any of us. So to all you fathers, fathers yet to be, and every other male who doesn't fit either of those categories, I share this lesson I had the opportunity to learn again just a couple of weeks ago. It is okay for you to ask for, to review, and to follow directions. Doing so is in your best interest as well as the best interest of everyone who cares for and looks up to you. It might seem like getting and following directions is a hassle, but in the long run it will make life easier and better for you and those closest to you.

On this Father's Day I want to say thank you. Thank you to all of the men who have done your best to exhibit the characteristics and attributes that make an overwhelmingly positive difference in the lives of children, whether those children are

yours by genetics or by choice. It is my hope that your day is blessed with the best gifts any father could ever receive, the love, the respect, and the admiration of the child who is dear to you.

So may it be.