

“FATHERS’ FOOTSTEPS, SHADOWS, AND ARMOR”

Proper 7B June 21, 2009

1 Samuel 17:32-49 Mark 4:35-41

Introduction:

Today is Father’s Day. I find it a more difficult day to celebrate in church than Mother’s Day – not on a personal level but due to the fact that many people have had a difficult time with their earthly father and that caused problems connecting with their Heavenly Father. For instance, I had a woman parishioner tell me once that she was solid with Jesus, fine with the Holy Spirit, but mortally afraid of God, the Father.

My theologically trained instinct was to launch into a lecture about the ‘oneness’ of God, and if she was solid with Jesus and fine with the Holy Spirit, there was absolutely no reason to be afraid of our Heavenly Father. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit got to me before I could open my ignorant mouth, and I heard myself asking her if she knew “why” she was afraid of the Heavenly Father. Without hesitation, she responded: “Of course I do. My father was a drunken brute who terrorized the entire family. I grew up mortally afraid of him. To this day I cannot hear the word “father” without having my stomach lurch into a knot, my breathing quicken and become shallow, and a sense of dread come over me.”

I knew then, she didn’t need a theological

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explanation of the 'oneness' of God. She needed deliverance from the 'sins of the father', which was a ministry I wasn't prepared for.

So, welcome to Father's Day – 2009. I don't know what all of your experiences are with your earthly fathers, and how they may be playing into your current relationship with your Heavenly Father, but I do pray that I might be led by the Holy Spirit to say some things this morning that could help someone.

The truth is, even in families where the father-child relationship is pretty good, there are conflicts often based on expectations from fathers that their children will follow in their footsteps, while remaining in their shadow, and all the time wearing the father's armor. Armor is a metaphor for the father's attempts to equip his children to battle life.

I drew these terms from the Old Testament lesson from 1 Samuel, we heard read this morning. The scene is a battle to the death between Israel and the Philistines. Each army is to send out it's champion to fight the other – sort of a 'winner takes all' proposition. It is the story of

David and Goliath:

I think there are analogies in this story that

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inform our parent-child, and soul to God relationships. As we studied last week, David had been chosen by God to be the next King of Israel. He was anointed with holy oil as a sign of God's approval, and the Holy Spirit came upon him mightily from that day forward. However, after that glorious moment, David went back to the sheep and his three oldest brothers to the army. But, God was at work. King Saul was vexed with an evil spirit from the Lord that tormented him from time to time. His servants talked Saul into letting them look for someone who could play the harp for Saul in order to sooth his emotions when he was being tormented.

As it would happen, one of the servants had seen David, knew he could play the harp; knew he was a brave man, a warrior, could speak well, and was fine looking. Saul subsequently sent a message to Jesse requesting that David be sent to serve inside his household. Saul liked David, his ministry was helpful, so Saul made David one of his armor-bearers. Saul allowed David to travel back and forth between his father's sheep and the army. Saul became a father-figure in David's life.

Some time later, the armies of the Philistines and Israel were camped opposite each other at the Valley of Elah, getting ready for a major battle. The Philistines

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had a champion, a giant named Goliath, who came out each day to taunt Israel to send out their champion. They would battle to the death – winner take all. Whoever lost, that man's nation would be enslaved to the other side.

The stakes were high. Because of his gigantic size (about 9 feet tall), Goliath had succeeded in totally demoralizing the entire army of Israel.

David arrives one day, bringing provisions from his father for the brothers. He is visiting with them when Goliath comes out and issues his daily challenge. *“When the Israelites saw the man, they all ran from him in great fear”* (:24). David saw and heard all this, and also heard that the King would give great wealth to the man who killed Goliath, as well as his daughter in marriage. That interested David, but David was moved with anger and said: *“Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God”* (:26)? David's brothers were upset with him for embarrassing them by raising a fuss about Goliath. After all, he wasn't a soldier. His life wasn't on the line. In addition, what he said got back to Saul who sent for him.

David had to be full of the Spirit of God because he said to Saul: *“Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him”* (:32). Saul

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was doubtful that David was ready to fight Goliath, but David convinced Saul that he was capable of fighting the giant because he had already fought and killed lions and bears: *“The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine”* (: 37). David did not suffer any relationship issues with his Heavenly Father! He trusted God completely.

What happened next in the story?

Saul dressed David (:38):

You know the story: Saul dressed David in his heavy, cumbersome armor. When David was dressed he put on Saul's sword and tried walking around. *“I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I am not used to them.” So he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine* (:39-40).

King Saul, David's surrogate father, was trying to protect David; and the only way he knew to protect him was to arm him – to prepare him - like he would arm or prepare himself. Sometimes, Dads that works, doesn't it?. Often, though, it doesn't. Jesse had eight sons – three of them were in the army and would have gladly wore the

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King's armor, if they had any inclination to fight the giant – which they didn't.

David wasn't like his brothers, his father, or King Saul. David had the heart of a poet, he was a musician, a shepherd, and was physically, extraordinarily brave. I'm not sure, short of trying to save the lives of my wife, or one of my children, if I would even consider doing battle with a lion or a bear. When I used to hike on the Appalachian Trail, I always prayed not to encounter a bear. Humans don't ordinarily win in confrontations with wild bears. David attacked lions and bears to save sheep – his father's sheep.

David couldn't fight Goliath like a trained soldier, wearing armor, carrying a shield, fighting with a sword. In his years alone, in the wild, tending his father's sheep, David became an expert, a warrior, using the weapons at hand: a staff and a sling.

David had enough confidence in himself that he could take off that armor, pick up what he already had confidence in, move out from under the shadow of his father figure, his brothers, and even Jesse back home. David couldn't fight Goliath walking in anyone's footsteps but his own.

David's story is one of glorious, victorious, faith:

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supreme faith in God; faith in his own fighting abilities, faith in his heritage. Together, David had the kind of faith that cannot be defeated and that leads to

A Few Comments About Fatherhood:

There is a delicate balance between mentoring and meddling; instructing and intimidating, facilitating and frightening.

There is almost a sense in parenting where we have to realize that we are not raising our children, we are raising someone else's; and that someone else is God. Each child is a gift from God, comes from God, and will return to God. Our job, is not to raise these children in our image, but in God's image. Our image is flawed, and doomed to ultimate failure. God's image is glorious and eternal.

We do our best – before God - to mentor, instruct, and facilitate our children to become the person God created them to be. When a child discovers who he or she is; who God created them to become; what God designed them to do in this world, then a quiet, supreme confidence begins to take root within their soul. They are no longer searching for meaning; they are living their meaning. That's what David did.

When we try to keep our children in our shadow,

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walking in our footsteps, fighting life's battles wearing our armor, we do damage to their soul, their spirit, their sense of themselves. Their self-confidence is fractured. They don't operate out of a central core of confident worth. They live fragmented lives trying always to please us, and never succeeding. They never realize their fullest potential because we have never given them permission to go off on their own and slay the bears and lions of their lives.

It's hard as parents, who deeply love our children, to lift them to God, catch God's vision for them, and raise them to also see themselves through God's eyes – not ours. It's hard to open our hands, give them back to God, and then let God return them to us as stewards of God's possession, not ours.

Maybe, the best gift we can give them is to demonstrate our unflinching faith in God, and to love them like God loves us. Children don't need to walk in our footsteps, live in our shadows, and wear our armor to have successful lives. They need to walk in the steps Jesus pioneered for them, live in the shadow of God's glory, and arm themselves with the armor of God.

The truth is, we parents are the giants in most of our children's lives; and they end up battling us, trying to

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break free to live their own lives.

Enough said. God will minister the rest to each heart as needed, and willingly received.

Happy Father's Day!

Praise God!