

Sunday Sermon
June 17, 2018
II Corinthians 5:6-17
Family of God

Introduction

In the Presbyterian Church, Father's Day is designated as Men of the Church Day, a day in which we recognize and celebrate the gifts of men.

There is something I have noticed about most men in churches. They are always putting themselves down, always bragging about the women, the youth, and the children and what they do, but never taking much credit for anything themselves.

But we know better. We know who is always behind us, making things happen. We may dream dreams and have visions, but the men are the ones who figure out how to make them happen.

So we celebrate today the gifts of men in our families and in the church family. And so we express our appreciation and love to you, and we thank God for you.

I

In the last years of his life, my father spent a lot of time telling stories. Some of those stories he told over and over. But they were great stories from his life, and we loved hearing them.

There were stories about his growing up in Caldwell County during the depression, stories about being crippled by polio and being taken from his home by the social worker to stay for over two years at an orthopedic hospital in Gastonia.

There were stories about the war and my dad's volunteering as a civilian, since he was 4-F and could not enlist. How he went to repair electronic equipment on aircraft at Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu. There was even an incredible story about repairing the navigational system on a plane called the Enola Gay as it was on its way to Hiroshima.

And I have my own stories about my father. About how he wore the same clothes season after season so that I could have new and stylish ones. About how he, without saying a word, took his tractor and pulled our car out of the mud after my brother and I decided on our way home from school to take a short cut on a dirt road through the woods.

I never thought of my father as being crippled. In fact, when friends would ask about his limp, I was always surprised because I never saw it. My father taught me how to fish, how to play ball, how to swim, how to garden. Of more importance, he taught me about patience, about perseverance, about overcoming obstacles, and about seeing possibility in all things and looking at all things in new ways.

And yet, when I was an adolescent in the junior department at church (that is comparable to middle school these days), I was surprised to learn that my father was

going to be my teacher. I thought, “Dad, teaching my class?” It was not that I did not see him as a good candidate to teach. I knew how worn his Bible was. I just could not picture him passing out construction paper and telling stories on the flannel board.

Well, Dad did not pass out one sheet of construction paper nor mount one character on flannel cloth. To tell the truth, I cannot remember much of what he did in the actual mechanics of teaching. What I do remember is that he was there, every Sunday, in our department. He let us ask questions. He even let us say when we disagreed. He did not get irritated or angry with us.

That was important at that age. We were standing at the crossroads of childhood and adolescence, and he was there for us. He cared about us, he never gave up on us, he believed in what God could do in and through us.

II

It was in that junior high class that I came to know the Apostle Paul. There in that classroom upstairs behind the sanctuary, I was impressed by Paul as someone who was always rejoicing, always overflowing with thanks to God, always convinced that “all things work together for good for those who love the Lord.”

But then as time passed, I came to see another side of Paul, a Paul who was discouraged, weary, depressed, sometimes even irritated and angry. And usually those times were when Paul was dealing with the Corinthian church. That church at Corinth gave Paul a fit.

In Paul’s day, Corinth was a crossroads of the Roman empire. There were inhabitants in Corinth from all nationalities, races, and religions of the known world. There were religions with idol worship. There were religions with fertility cults. And mixed in with all the religions was a predominate secularism in the culture.

And we think we invented diversity, pluralism, and secularism.

The Corinth church itself was made up of converts from multiple religious backgrounds and multiple cultures, and they experienced multiple problems.

They argued over what was appropriate to eat and not to eat. They got distracted by their neighbors’ worship of idols. They had members who followed different, some extreme, marital customs. There was sexual immorality.

Judging by what Paul wrote, the church sometimes had what amounted to shouting matches in worship. Paul says sometimes they turned the Lord’s Supper into a drunken feast. There were misunderstanding about spiritual gifts and arguments over what happens to you when you die. Furthermore, there was a group in the church criticizing Paul, even denying his right to be called an apostle.

And we think we invented problems in the church.

III

But Paul knew about the power of Christ to re-create someone. He had

experienced it in his life. And he saw it happen in the church in Corinth. He was ready to give up on them, give them up to the pagan culture around them. And then he saw it happen, a transforming re-creation. The spirit of Christ moved, they became a new creation, and they changed their ways.

Some people think that Christians live in certain ways, like showing compassion for the poor, practicing fidelity in marriage, honesty and peacemaking in relationships, because we are trying to get somewhere with God. We work hard to keep our slates clean in order to please God.

No, Christians live as they do, not to get somewhere, but rather because they know that, in Christ, we have already arrived, at a whole new world.

Now admittedly, the world does not seem that different from Corinth in Paul's day or the worlds of our fathers, grandfathers, or great grandfathers. There is still plenty of evil, war, injustice, oppression, abuse of power. But when we experience Christ's transforming re-creation in our lives, we are able to envision God's new world and we want to work toward it, so that the kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven.

Conclusion

It is a day for remembering stories from the father figures of our lives. And when we share our stories with each other, we realize how similar our families are. We find ourselves belonging to each other, all part of the family of God. And we realize in that family there are no perfect fathers or mothers, no perfect families. All our families have stories that include trials, tribulations, and tragedies.

But Paul says transformation is possible when we let Christ into our lives and allow him to make us a new creation from the inside out. And then we look at others not from simply a human point of view, but rather through the lenses of Christ's transforming work. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" May it be so for our families on this Father's Day 2018.