

The Blessing of Fathers

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Genesis 49: 1-28

As if we have not said it often enough today, Happy Father's Day! While Mother's Day was started in 1872 as a day to encourage peace, Father's Day was created by a grateful daughter, raised by her father after her mother's death. It was Sonora Smart Dodd, after hearing a mother's day sermon in 1909 that decided that fathers ought to get their due as well. In 1972 President Nixon finally signed the law, making the third Sunday in June, Fathers Day.

For some people these family days, mothers and fathers day, are difficult times. If your relationship with your mother or father is prickly or painful or down right abusive it can be hard to know how to "celebrate" the way that Hallmark seems to dictate.

Fear not. You are not alone if you have a difficult relationship with a parent. Families have always struggled. In fact though we don't often admit it, I bet there are families in this very room that fight, maybe to the point that they wonder if there is a point.

Our spiritual ancestors are a model of struggle, deceit, and family dysfunction. All we have to do is open to Genesis and we see trouble. The family stories that we get in Genesis alone are enough to keep you wondering for months. They are mostly lessons in how not to treat your children or spouse, or parents, or concubine. Cain and Abel were separated by jealousy and sibling rivalry. Abraham could not manage to find charitable ways to get along with his two women and two sons. Along with tricking his brother and his uncle, Jacob steals his fathers blessing.

Blessings were an important part of family life. It was how the inheritance got passed on. Remember how Jacob tricked Esau out of his inheritance by tempting him with the lentil stew? Then he tricked Esau out of his father's deathbed blessing by dressing up in the hairy clothes of animals? Jacob and Esau from the very beginning seem destined to be in conflict. And then Jacob has his own huge brood of children, from wives and concubines.

Given his own difficulties in life you would think that Jacob would had patience for his many sons. In Genesis 49 we get a snapshot of past, present and future in Jacob's family and what is to come for the larger faith family.

Genesis 49: 1-28 (NRSV)

¹Then Jacob called his sons, and said: "Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in days to come. ²Assemble and hear, O sons of Jacob; listen to Israel your father.

³Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the first fruits of my vigor, excelling in rank and excelling in power. ⁴Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up onto your father's bed; then you defiled it—you went up onto my couch!

⁵Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. ⁶May I never come into their council; may I not be joined to their company—for in their anger they killed men, and at their whim they hamstringed oxen. ⁷Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel.

⁸Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. ⁹Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness—who dares rouse him up? ¹⁰The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his.

¹¹*Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; ¹²his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk.*

¹³*Zebulun shall settle at the shore of the sea; he shall be a haven for ships, and his border shall be at Sidon.*

¹⁴*Issachar is a strong donkey, lying down between the sheepfolds; ¹⁵he saw that a resting place was good, and that the land was pleasant; so he bowed his shoulder to the burden, and became a slave at forced labor.*

¹⁶*Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. ¹⁷Dan shall be a snake by the roadside, a viper along the path, that bites the horse's heels so that its rider falls backward. ¹⁸I wait for your salvation, O LORD.*

¹⁹*Gad shall be raided by raiders, but he shall raid at their heels.*

²⁰*Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall provide royal delicacies.*

²¹*Naphtali is a doe let loose that bears lovely fawns.*

²²*Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a spring; his branches run over the wall. ²³The archers fiercely attacked him; they shot at him and pressed him hard. ²⁴Yet his bow remained taut, and his arms were made agile by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob, by the name of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, ²⁵by the God of your father, who will help you, by the Almighty who will bless you with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies beneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. ²⁶The blessings of your father are stronger than the blessings of the eternal mountains, the bounties of the everlasting hills; may they be on the head of Joseph, on the brow of him who was set apart from his brothers.*

²⁷*Benjamin is a ravenous wolf, in the morning devouring the prey, and at evening dividing the spoil."*

²⁸*All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them, blessing each one of them with a suitable blessing.*

These are the blessings that Jacob gives on his deathbed to his sons. While the text claims that these are blessings, maybe even predictions, some of these are actually curses. He curses Simeon and Levi, their anger and their cruel wrath. It was Simeon and Levi who led the massacre against Hamor and his son Shechem after Shechem raped their sister Dinah. (Dinah of course gets no blessing or curse. Her story is left untold in the biblical text. For the modern midrash read *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant. It is a very different take on the story of Jacob and his family seen from a woman's point of view.) Jacob is hard on Levi and Simeon, appropriately so. The odd or perhaps ironic thing is that the tribe of Levi ends up being the priestly clan. Perhaps becoming priests was a way of cleansing themselves of the curse?

We are no longer so familiar with some of these sons of Jacob. They sort of fade out of our awareness as the generations go by though I am sure they knew who they were, the descendents of Naphtali and Dan, Asher and the others. Most of the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah, the concubines, do not receive much notoriety.

In Deuteronomy 33 Moses also gives a deathbed blessing to the sons of Jacob, who by this time are the 12 tribes of Israel. The blessings of Moses are not identical to the ones that Jacob gave in Genesis. Most of the blessings Moses gives are more positive, for instance Levi sounds as if his tribe has most certainly been rehabilitated by this point by priestly work.

Blessings such as the ones we see in Genesis and Deuteronomy may seem quaint now. We leave a will and last testament. It is the lawyers that convey the blessings, at least the monetary ones. A strange trade we have made.

We may not leave deathbed blessings but during our lives together as families we certainly give blessings and curses to our children. We capture in our memory or perhaps our memory books, the idyllic times and retell those stories. We create times when we can be together as a family; the dinner table, a day at the zoo, Sunday morning worship. These are ways that we can bless our children, just by being.

And by the same way in every day life, we give curses. How often do we, in a fit of anger, say something we immediately regret. We hope that the child forgets more quickly than we do. And what child has heard an impatient word and taken the tone of voice to heart and embodied that anger in deeper ways than the episode warranted?

The blessings of Jacob and Moses tell us rather explicitly about the sons and the tribes, where they came from and who they become. What is left unsaid, what we are led to wonder about is what this meant for the patriarchs to give these blessings, to hold the power to bless and to curse. Were these fathers, the patriarchs, almost the embodiment of God? The favorites like Joseph and Judah were blessed. Those who were not from the right mother or who misbehaved are cursed. Is that the role of God or just the result of family life together?

Years ago feminist theologian Mary Daly said *"If God is male then the male is God."* I understand this to mean that if our name for God is "He" then soon we turn men into God, giving them more power than they should have. Put another way, if the male becomes God then there is hardly room for him to be human. And we all need human fathers.

What would it mean for us to look again at those patriarchs, at their pain, their weaknesses, their joy, their humor? What would it mean to take those patriarchs down off their pedestals and relate to them as real human beings?

What would it mean for us to look at our own fathers that way? Some fathers make that easy. We see their pain and anger all too clearly but instead of the pain leading us closer to them we are pushed away or we run away. All that emotion is too dangerous. They don't want to look at it themselves much less allow their children to see it. Other fathers make it easy because they are comfortable with who they are, smelly feet, belches and all. That too may repel us but probably not so much on the emotional level as the physical.

Despite Mary Daly's comments and her work toward the feminization of all of heaven and humanity we still call God "Father" throughout the Christian world. With what do we associate when we say God is our "heavenly father?" Do we think of our own fathers, with all the positive and negative emotions that are involved? Do we think of the opposite of our earthly father? Someone once told me that the way one experiences their own father as a child is the image of God that is most prevalent for them as an adult. If this is true, no wonder it is often hard for survivors of abuse or incest to find their way to a loving God. More curses that parents heap on their children.

What if instead of the elderly father dispensing blessings and wisdom, we were to think of the man that is just experiencing fatherhood for the first time.

French theologian Louis Evelly says this, *"To become a father, is to experience an infinite dependency on an infinitely small, frail being, dependent on us and therefore omnipotent over our heart."* Instead of being all powerful, to become a parent in reality is to enter a state of extreme vulnerability. (Krista Tippett from Speaking of Faith June 18, 2006)

Is it at all possible that this is how it is for God the Father? Is God actually dependent on us, vulnerable to the extreme? Certainly our image of the *Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world* is this vulnerable. But is

God really dependent. Are we interdependent with God? Our first instinct is probably to deny this. God is all knowing and all... everything. How could God be dependent on us? And yet it seems in Genesis that it is for companionship that God created humans, just as it is for company that mothers and fathers have children. What if we allowed God the father to be as tender and gentle as we allow the image of God the Mother to be?

If we are reframing our understanding of our Father God, what does that mean for the relationship with our own earthly fathers?

Or maybe we try to understand our earthly fathers in a new way first and that allows us to understand God in new ways. It may not matter which comes first. What is important is that we not put men or God in boxes that confine them to all powerful and invulnerable. As we cut the emotion out of the man or God we begin to also cut ourselves off from what they truly have to offer. I of course speak only as a woman, an outsider in this respect to men and fathers. Please correct me if I have strayed too far in my imagination. As adults it is possible to have a new kind of relationship with our parents if they are also open to that. Sometimes there can even be mutuality.

I have often wondered what exactly is meant by a personal relationship with Jesus or God. Could part of it be having a mutual relationship, where we not only show God those parts of ourselves that are sad, lonely, depressed, but we also allow ourselves to see the part of God that is sad and pained. Maybe even see the anger in the God that loves us like a father? For too long I have said God is all loving so God must not get angry. But if we take this metaphor to heart we know that anger happens, even when we love someone deeply. Fathers create boundaries, get angry when they are broken and discipline their children.. There is still a part of me that is uncomfortable and unsure with where that leads us theologically. It does seem to lead to some fruitful discussion about discipleship. If we are able to

shift in relationship to our earthly parents as we grow into adulthood is not the same required of us with our image of God?

Lest it sound as if I am trying to make God in our image, instead of the other way around, we have to recognize again that our language for God will always be incomplete. Perhaps our language for our fathers is too. But we do have the faith stories from the bible, the family stories from our traditions, and the opportunity to continue developing relationships with God and family throughout our lives. We do have the chance to give and receive mutual blessings as parents, as children, as friends.

May you draw close to God the father who holds you gently. May God bless you and keep you. May God shed tears with you and smile with you, walking with you in love and compassion.

Let us close praying together that most familiar of prayers to God our Father, the Lord's prayer.