

The Blessings of Fatherhood

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

June 17, 2012

By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Jacob received a blessing. I don't know if he was expecting it exactly. I suppose one is lead to believe from the story that he was hoping or wanting a blessing—otherwise why would he ask for one?

You see Jacob was in a difficult position. For him the proverbial chickens were coming home to roost. Jacob, of course, was the son of Isaac—the same Isaac that Abraham had nearly sacrificed to God. Isaac had two sons, twins actually, Esau was slightly older than Jacob, but according to the patriarchal practices of ancient Israel, Esau as the oldest was due the family inheritance. He stood to get everything, and Jacob nothing. So that when it came time for old Isaac to die, Jacob decided to pull a fast one. Knowing that his father couldn't see so well, Jacob pretended to be his brother, and as a result the ailing, nearly blind Isaac passed on his inheritance to Jacob instead of Esau. You can well imagine how Esau felt about this. Jacob got out of there fast, and started his own life. He had a couple of wives and many children. But no

matter where he went or what he did, he could not shake off that guilt of having tricked his father and cheated his older brother.

Which brings us to the ancient reading this morning. Jacob is facing down his brother's army. He sent envoys over to Esau to try and keep the peace, but his guilty conscious expects that this fight that is about to come to him is one he arguably deserves. As is the case for most of us when we are faced with a life-altering challenge the next day, Jacob has trouble sleeping. In the night he finds a stranger at the shores of the Jabbok River, and the two begin to wrestle. Although Jacob prevails, the stranger gets in a good shot and puts his hip out of place.

I have always liked that image of Jacob wrestling at the shores of the river with this stranger who turns out to be God. I think it is the quintessential UU story—we are the ones who wrestle with God. While it is not unusual for God to take on an anthropomorphic form in the Genesis stories, remember God walked in Eden with Adam and Eve, this I think is a metaphor. Jacob's wrestling with God is really a wrestling with himself and his anger at himself for his past actions. In the end he does not come out unscathed, but he does receive a blessing. His blessing is his name "Israel." In the Bible people are often named after the nations they would come to be the founder of, so when God names Jacob "Israel" he is saying that Jacob's children would be the founder of a nation by that name. To the Jewish reader of this story, they would understand themselves to be that blessing.

This is one of those stories that cries out for a Freudian interpretation! Battling God is a stand in for Jacob's father, and by extension his older brother. But this time instead of cheating the old man to get something he didn't deserve, Jacob wins and earns something instead—a blessing. The blessing of his identity. I believe that there are many stories in the Bible that are there because they are our story; part of a collective unconscious. These stories are called archetypes, and you have heard me talk about them before. How many sons seek their father's blessing? How many fail to get it, and for the rest of their lives they wrestle with their father's memory, when all they have ever wanted is to be blessed? Like Jacob, when we are blessed we are made whole; we know who we are. Fathers have that power.

I believe there are at least three blessings that fathers can bestow upon their children; they are love, legacy, and understanding. I will unpack what I mean by each of these in turn. I got a lot of good reaction to my Mother's Day sermon this year. A few folks commented on how much they liked it, and then they would add something to the effect of, "But don't forget about Dad!" "I won't!" I promised. I understand the sentiment. In our culture it is traditionally more acceptable for women to express their feelings more openly than it is for a man. If I may dare to stick my neck out even further to say that this is especially true of the older generations. My father and grandfather rarely showed emotions other than anger. As a result people tend to associate a mother's love as

something more tender, more comforting. This is generally speaking of course, there are plenty of exceptions. The result is that sometimes Mother's Day is a bigger deal than Father's Day. I am sure that is what those folks were asking of me: give equal time to both.

Take for example popular culture. You can see some interesting images of what we think about mothers and fathers there. Sometimes those archetypes I mentioned will play themselves out right before your eyes on the silver screen. Pixar, the computer animation company now owned by Disney, has come under fire by feminists because all of the protagonists in their movies, and indeed most of their main characters, have been male. With that critique in mind, I found their newest film noteworthy: Brave. It's the story of a young girl who is the daughter of a king and queen. Tradition has it that she is supposed to be married away but instead tries to live life on her own terms without abiding by such old world ways. The plot sounds like it was written by Gloria Steinem herself. So it's nice to see that sometimes people in the media are listening.

I don't think this is an either/or proposition. One can be pro feminist and pro father at the same time. So it is in no way a contradiction to lift up one of Pixar's other films, Finding Nemo, as example of a father's love for his child. I shan't summarize the plot of the movie; my guess is most of you have seen it. For those of you who have not—go rent it immediately. I like the movie because for once a

father is able to show genuine love and affection for his child, albeit a fish, and it isn't apologized for. No one has to explain or give some exposition as to why this father loves his son; he just does. Of course Marlin worries about his lost son Nemo. Of course he would face all of his fears and search the entire ocean to find him. There is no need to explain that motivation. No need to hit us over the head to say, "Oh yeah, Dad's love their kids too!" as if that were not obvious given the events of the film. It is just there.

I certainly understand the temptation to do so. Not every father in every family has had the ability or felt comfortable enough in expressing their love and affection for their children. They may not express it, but that does not mean it is not there. Robert Fulghum tells the story of a woman whose father was one such as that. A disciplinarian who was respected, maybe even a bit feared, but not the lovable huggable teddy bear than his daughter might have wanted. When he passed away his daughter had to sift through his belongings. This was a house filled with many decades of memories. As she was clearing out of the closets she found teeth. Small teeth taped to pieces of paper with her name and dates written on them. Her father had been the tooth fairy! He had kept her teeth all of these years. Fulghum summarizes this tale with the proclamation, "Not all family secrets are bad ones!" Love is a blessing our fathers give us even when they cannot verbalize it to their, or our, satisfaction.

Another blessing we can receive is understanding. It is probably clique to admit it but I find myself understanding my Dad much better now that I am a father myself. First of all I have noticed him staring back at me in the mirror. But what is really scary is when I hear him speaking through my voice. That is a surreal experience!

We have a tradition at my house that on Memorial Day, I will cook up a big batch of ribs. I took up the hobby of home barbecuing pretty seriously when I lived in Omaha. Omaha was known for its beef and Iowa for its pork. Kansas City smokes them both, so the activity rubbed off on me. This past Memorial Day was no different. I spent the day relaxing in the backyard, the smoker revved up and doing its thing. The kids had just gotten one of those yard wading pools, and were enjoying splashing in the hot sun. I was tending the grill when Matthew, my youngest at three years old, came ambling up the hill toward me. Probably to give me a hug since he was soaking wet!

Matthew was wet going uphill on grass and looked a little wobbly. Only slightly more so than usual for being three years old. He walked up rather nonchalantly. I told him to back away from the grill. “Get back!” I shouted. But I was too late—just as the words left my mouth, little Matthew pressed the top of his forearm up against the side of smoker where I had a pile of hot coals. He burned the top layers of skin right off and caught a little piece of his knuckle. He was rushed to ER at Nemours who did a fantastic job taking care of him. Be careful when

you are grilling this summer boys and girls. He is fine now. There is a big red mark on his arm, but it probably won't scar. We need to watch his burn in the warm sun this summer.

What surprised me about myself in this whole incident was that moment when I yelled out "Get back!" It was exactly as my Dad used to shout at me when I was young. Frankly I didn't know I could do such a good impersonation of him. This made me completely reevaluate my childhood relationship with my father. I used to wonder, "Why is Dad yelling at us all the time?" First of all, he didn't do it all of the time, but the times he did yell made an impression. Now I understand; in the heat of the moment sometimes it's all you can do. But it is dangerous—kids don't know not to take that personally and can internalize such rantings if they are done too often. It is one thing to yell when you are about to get burnt, but that is not the lasting memory I would like my children to have of me!

Which brings me to the final blessing of fatherhood: legacy. It is yet another cliché to say that having children is a form of immortality. It is of course, but I can't say that I know of anyone who cites this as an actual reason for having children. It would be the height of arrogance to proclaim to the world, "My genes need to be carried on throughout eternity!" It sounds like something a Bond villain would say! But it is true. Parents make big impressions on their children. I remember my Dad every Sunday who taught me how to tie a tie. Every time I do it,

which is most Sundays of the year, I remember him walking me through the steps. I don't know if that is the kind of immortality my father was hoping for, but it is a way in which his being reverberates through mine and always will. Someday I will teach my boys how to tie a tie using the same lesson and probably the same words.

One of the ways I have noticed that my boys and I share something in common is by the literature we like. When I was young, "Where the Wild Things Are" was one of my favorite books, and a night-time necessity when going to bed. I am not alone. You can go to stores and buy T-shirts with the "wild rumpas" displayed proudly upon them. There is something in a child that is still a bit wild. They are in this point in life when civilization has not quite kicked in, and that is both a good and a bad thing. That story speaks to escaping those civilizing elements of life and just being wild and having it be OK. And it is so well illustrated—kids love that part when Max is dancing with the monsters, all of whom are so expressively drawn. Now that Sendak is no longer with us, we can see that this book is his legacy to us.

My boys love this book as I did. Max is drawn to wildness, but then misses home, and the love and acceptance he knows he has there despite the fight he had been in earlier. But the wild things refuse to let him go. Their love is not really love but co-dependence; "I'll eat you up I love you so." Max is the quintessential non-anxious presence. He gets in his boat, that has his name on it, waves good-bye, and sails home. He

does argue with the monsters or tell them they are bad. He is still in relationship. Max is simply himself. Like Jacob, he is at last at peace because he knows who he is and acts accordingly.

That I think, is the best legacy of all. It is not that I must imprint a carbon copy of my ego onto my children. The true blessing is in helping them express themselves, sometimes independently of me, and sometimes the same as me, but always coming from deep inside them. As Channing once famously said of religious education, the goal is not to stamp our mind on the young but to stir up their own. Fathers have the tools to do that for their children, even when it was not done for them. That can be hard but it is possible.

The next morning when Jacob returned to his family, limping, he saw his older brother Esau. Esau wept when he saw Jacob, he embraced him, asked about his family. Esau forgave everything, even offered Jacob the inheritance. Jacob had to insist that Esau accept his peace-offering gifts. In the end the brothers were reconciled—that was the blessing God spoke of. This Father's Day let us remember our fathers as they were: gifted with words or not. Expressive of their feelings, or not. But always with love; a love that stirs deep in the soul and spans the breadth of their years. For love is the best blessing of all.

This is my last sermon of the church year. It has been a heck of a ride, but I can truly say that I am as grateful as ever to serve you as your

Senior Minister. I wouldn't trade a moment of it. Next year has a great deal of change in store for us; change that I think will move us to the next level and help us achieve our dreams of becoming the congregation we are destined to be. I look forward to Ingathering this fall when I will share more of that vision with you. But for now let me say only have a nice summer. Amen Blessed Be.