

From the Pulpit

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*“Fathers, Sons and Daughters:
Spirited, Biblical, Complicated”
Genesis 1:1- 2:4a, Romans 12:1-12;
Matthew 28:16-20*

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy Carl Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio at St. John's UCC, Lansdale, PA, Trinity Sunday, June 15, 2014, dedicated to my father Dr. Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. on the occasion of his 90th Birthday, to my children and to dads everywhere and always to the glory of God!

*“Fathers, Sons and Daughters:
Spirited, Biblical, Complicated”*

Genesis 1:1- 2:4a, Romans 12:1-12; Matthew 28:16-20

“Holy, Holy, Holy” – you can count on it! As a child growing up in St. John's, every single Trinity Sunday opened with Hymn #1 in the old E&R hymnal – “Holy, Holy, Holy.” So I have always thought of this Sunday as “Triple Holy Day.” This Trinity Sunday, I have joined my two siblings and a host of other family members and friends to celebrate the third cycle of my dad's 30th birthday - also known as his 90th birthday. Reflecting the Trinitarian nature of this day, my sermon title speaks of fathers, sons, and daughters - relationships which are spirited, biblical and complicated.

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations
of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord,
our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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On the sixth day of Creation, God created a father. More specifically God created “Adam” – which means “one from the earth.” In Adam, God saw the one who could be close to the earth and care for creation. He was the first human about to become the first dad. Then God created Eve and before their family started God needed a day of Sabbath peace. You might call it “God’s peace before the storm.”

From the first couple, children were born - Cain, Abel, Seth and “then other sons and daughters” – with no names. Do I perceive a possible identity crisis for last born children that runs down to our current day? Cain was a crop farmer and his younger brother Abel was a shepherd. Cain was the first human born and Abel was the first human to die. The first death in human history was fratricide as Cain committed the first murder by killing his brother – Abel. Seth and the unnamed ones were born post-fratricide babies born to grieving parents shortly after they lost their first two sons - one murdered and one banished.

Trauma engulfed the first family. How was it that the first father responded?

The truth is we know very little about the first dad. Our Biblical story gives us no information about what kind of father Adam was. Without many cues and clues to fatherhood in the first dad, fathers – nevertheless - emerge mightily in the Bible.

As it turns out, Fathers play an important role in the Bible. The word “father” appears more than 1200 times while “mother” is mentioned only 220. The most frequently used familial relation named in scriptures is “son” – over 5,000 times – because men are so often presented as sons of fathers. While it would be easy (and very UCC of me) to pass over these numbers and the importance of fathers, their sons (and daughters) in scripture due to patriarchalism in the Biblical era, I cannot and will not do that.

It turns out dad’s really matter in the scriptures. You see, God speaks through fathers. And I believe, God is still speaking through dads. At least God is still speaking through MY dad.

In Biblical dads we discover much about familial relationships. Many of our early lessons point out the divisions of families.

These are intense and deeply complicated men in relation to their sons, daughters and wives. There is unconditional love and incense; tribal togetherness and selling of siblings into slavery; courting and marriage and offering wives and daughters for sex. Do you see what I mean – complicated and spirited – truly loving and intensely immoral.

Noah and his sons battle each other while simultaneously fighting to save creation in the midst of God's destruction of the humankind. All of them suffer for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as witnesses of all humanity's drowning outside the ark – not to mention living in close quarters with all the rest of creation for a long time.

Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac have significant interactions – not all good. At his wife Sarah's demand, Abraham sends Ishmael out into the desert with his mother Hagar and later attempts to slay Isaac as a human sacrifice. The sons come back together for their father's funeral but their childhood split is played out as the deep rooted present day division between Muslims and Jews. While both claim Abraham as father, Muslims claim Ishmael and Jews claim Isaac as the carrier of their mighty tribe's line.

Jacob and his twelve sons split apart because of Jacob's over indulgent love for Joseph and noted neglect of the

other 11 creates a sibling rivalry that splits the kids. Father Jacob divides his sons through favoritism. Other patriarchs and “just plain dads” show all their humanity and fragility throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. While there are tender moments, like Tobit opening his heart to his son, most of the stories are filled with pathos and struggle.

I am not an “OLD TESTAMENT BAD!” “NEW TESTAMENT GOOD!” person or preacher. I never have been and never will be. But, I will say, there are significant breakthroughs in familial relations as the stories are told in the New Testament.

Beginning with Joseph, Jesus’ adoptive father, we have a vision of a righteous man who stands by his family – first his betrothed, Mary who has an immaculate conception before they are married. He delivers her son, helps the newborn Jesus and Mary flee to safety in Egypt and then returns to raise Jesus in Nazareth as his own son – the son of a carpenter. This righteous and faithful man inspires Jesus to tell parables of a loving and forgiving father, and of course the relationship between Jesus and God is one of a beloved son in the eyes of a loving father. Jesus calls God “Abba” or “daddy” - even from the cross in agony he cries to God as a son beseeching his dad while in his hour of ultimate pain unto death.

In the Gospels, the disciples come from stable families and their fishermen fathers are mentioned as they support sons who go forth to fish for men and women – souls for God. This is truly amazingly graceful and risky. When Zebedee supports his sons becoming disciples, this dad is acknowledging that his future is in God’s hands – with no sons to support him in his Galilean fishing boat.

In The Acts of the Apostles, dads take on some new roles. The centurion Cornelius brings his entire household to Christ as they are all baptized together. In Acts 16, a prison official becomes a good father in his house as he believes in God and leads his family to follow God in Christ. Fathers and sons begin to emerge in a positive light. Other households emerge through the early church and fathers are central parts of their success as a family.

While the connections between mothers and their children are so often clear from gestation to labor to birth to “raising Cain” (and Abel), the connections between fathers and their sons and daughters happen when a dad reaches out to claim it and make it visible. Fathers are always trying (or not trying as it were) to figure out to connect with their sons and daughters. As fathers, we have to invest ourselves in the relationships. We have to “own” our place in the relationship. We have to make the efforts to pick up the baby, change the diapers and now - pick up the phone and

connect through every means possible to get between our children's noses and their I-phones. We have about 12" of space to work in! We have to take time to become the dads God calls us to be – loving, forgiving, disciplined, fun-filled and grace-filled men with children. And if we don't have children, men have to figure out how to positively be present with children who have no dads to speak of. As a pastor and a 20 year weekly volunteer in the public schools of Ohio, I can spend hours telling you stories of absent, abusive, hurtful, neglectful dads. I heard a story just the other day about ANOTHER dad who disappeared from his daughter's life only to become real to her once she pursued the father-daughter relationship. So sad and so unnecessarily painful. In this case, absence did not make the heart grow stronger. Our society is littered with broken familial relationships. Toxic familial dumps are in our neighborhoods – not just in the Love Canal neighborhood of Niagara Falls, NY!

There are hundreds of relationships in scripture which speak to the spirited and complicated nature of relationships between fathers, sons and daughters. We are called to sort them out and in many cases, we are called to **not** become reflections of those relationships. Rather, our call as dads is to completely engage ourselves and invest ourselves in the greatest virtues and highest values lifted up in the texts and

stories which make up our faith. In his generation, my dad was one who tried to figure this out and live into these virtues and values. But, I must add – I was blessed to be raised here at St. John’s where lots of “Village Dads” – especially George Richardson reached out to me and helped raise me too. In a community of faith, all men are called to be dads. Theology – not biology – should guide our steps of faith.

There are many things I remember about my father growing up. He always brought us to church along with my mom. Do you know that there are actual studies done on this? When fathers bring children to church, the likelihood of the children returning as adults to worship doubles from 40% to 80% return rates! Amazing! Dads – get your children to church. If they are sleeping in moms and kids, tell them a dad told you to tell them to get to church.

I once asked dad if he prayed. He said “every day... many times as day.” I told him I didn’t see him praying. He said, “ We are told in Matthew to pray in private. So, I pray in my room.” When I asked dad about scripture, he told me his favorite scripture was Romans 12. As a child, I didn’t pay much attention to this. I stored it away in my brain – but as dad myself, I dug into this passage.

In this letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome written around 65 AD, Paul writes some amazing words for living. I want to share the essence of Romans 12 with you in words that hopefully make sense. With the help of Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, I rewrote these words for our 2005 high school graduating class years ago -my oldest son Luke's class. I hope they inspire you as they have inspired my dad. There are 25 top hits of faith here. Maybe some will grab hold of your soul and influence your relationships with others and with God.

Offer your everyday, ordinary life to God.

Take hold of what God does for you as the best thing you can do for God.

Don't become so comfortable in this culture that you fit in without even thinking about what you are doing. Instead, fix your focus on God. God will change you from the inside out.

Ask every single day, what would God have me do in this situation I am in? Then respond to it, and do the right thing. Remember, God always brings out the best in people!

Be thankful every day in every way to God for all the blessings of your life.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself – stop complaining about your life.

Live in the pure grace of God.

Be generous. Be compassionate.

Let your love be genuine. Don't fake it.

Run for dear life from evil, hold on for dear life to what is good.

Be a good friend who loves deeply.

Practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out. Keep yourself fueled and aflame.

Be cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times, but pray to God all the harder!

Help people who are in need.

Be inventive in hospitality.

Bless your enemies and remember, no cursing under your breath.

Laugh with your happy friends when they are happy. Cry with them when they are down.

Get along with everybody.

Don't get stuck on yourself – you are never as good or as bad as all that.

Make friends with nobodies. Don't be tried to be the great somebody.

Don't hit back when hurt (that includes words – they can hurt others, too).

Discover beauty within everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody.

Don't insist on getting even. That's not for you to do. Remember what God says, "I'll do the judging. I'll take care of 'getting even.'"

Remember also what our scriptures tell us: when you see your enemy hungry, buy him lunch. When you see him thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness.

Do not let evil get the best of you. Get the best of evil by doing good.

I have to be totally honest. I feel like my dad channeled the spirit of the Apostle Paul to me and everyone he walked through life with!

It comes to the spirited, biblical and complicated interactions between fathers and our sons and daughters; the

truth is we have to live the essence of our faithful interactions every day. And every day we have to ask God and our children for forgiveness when we screw up. There is no “Good Book” that tells us everything we need to make it as fathers in this world. I wish it was that simple. Rather it is more like a laboratory in which we experiment through trial and error with the things we hope work. The challenge is not to have it blow up in our faces. Even then, we have to go back and begin again with the elements of life and faith.

I have learned valuable lessons from my father in our 56 plus years of life together. Tell your children you love them. Let your moral conscience be your guide. Before you speak or act, think and pray. Ask yourself what God and Jesus would do in given situations. Stay close to Jesus Christ and his Church – even if your relationship with the church resembles a “Lover’s Quarrel” – I know mine does. Love unconditionally – as best as you are able. Keep the faith.

And as my father always says, “Keep in touch.”

I love you Dad! Amen.

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