



Sermon of June 20, 1999



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"HONORING THE FATHERS"

Joshua 4:1-7

Hebrews 11:17-22

I returned late last night from the California-Pacific Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, the regional body of our denomination that meets annually at the University of Redlands. You will hear a report later on, probably through the Outlook, about the most interesting events that happened at the Conference.

In the Methodist tradition, the Conference is where ministers are ordained. Last night Craig Dorval, on our staff, was ordained at the Conference. He told me last night that many of you have no clue as to what it means to be ordained an elder, so I am going to give you a lesson in that. If Craig were a lawyer, it is like being admitted to the bar. It means that he has been declared fit for ministry by his peers, by other ministers, and welcomed now into the community of preachers.

That is one level of ordination. You could call that the institutional understanding of ordination. But there is a spiritual level as well, or a theological level. That means that though it was the hand of the bishop that was placed on his head last night in his ordination, we believe, and those who will come to Craig as a pastor will expect, that God also placed his hand on him and blessed him.

So Craig is at the site of the Conference, as are the rest of the clergy on this staff and our lay delegates. I think there were something like sixteen or eighteen of us out there this past week. They are still there, except Peggy and me. For if we are going to have services here in San Diego this day, somebody had to come back. So we came back.

There is another tradition of the Conference, which is to read the appointments. We Methodist preachers are appointed to our posts annually. The appointments are read during the closing service of the Conference, which is going on right now in Redlands. So I left without knowing if I was going to be reappointed here. But I would guess the chances of my being moved at this point in my career are rather remote, so I felt free to come home. But the other ministers, feeling more vulnerable, thought they better stay out there and listen to the roll.

This is Father's Day. I knew that I was going to preach on this Sunday, which is not necessarily common for me to do, because in previous years I have spent Conference Sunday at the site of the conference, and we have had a tradition in this church for this being Choir Sunday. But since I knew that I would be preaching on this Sunday, on Father's Day, I bought Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*. I thought it might be helpful in preparing this sermon. I had heard about it. It has been something of a best seller, I understand, so I read it.

Brokaw's definition of the greatest generation is his father's generation. It is the men, and women, who went to war in 1941. It was during his assignment as a TV journalist to cover the 50th anniversary of the landing at Normandy that it dawned on him that these men had made a great sacrifice, and were modern day heroes, but nobody knew much about them. Especially about the common soldier, thousands of them, who landed on the beach that day.

He discovered that the reason that their stories remained untold is because the men themselves didn't talk about it. That was the most amazing thing to Brokaw, their modesty and humility in this age of self-promotion. That was astounding to Brokaw. What these men did was to face the worst that could possibly happen to them, with the best that was in them. And they did it as a matter of course, something that they were called to do, so they did it.

And then they came back home and began their lives where they had left off. They married, had children, raised families, built homes, and joined churches. He mentions that specifically, how many of these men who came back from the war joined churches. How they tried to live useful and productive lives in their community, down playing their deeds, not talking about it. That has been my experience, too. Veterans of that war, in fact veterans of any war, they don't talk about it.

Brokaw wrote the book because there is something in us that needs to hear the stories of those who have gone before us. Since this is Father's Day, I can be allowed, I think, to underscore that need, especially for men. Men need the stories of heroes to help us become the men that

we are capable of becoming.

One of the saddest things that I have ever heard is that the fathers no longer have anything to give to the sons. I heard that first some years ago in reference to the changes in society that have occurred since the II World War, changes that have come about, ironically, because of the technology that was developed during the war, military technology that was then converted to peace-time use. Now, several generations later, the jobs that are available to young people are jobs that have been created by that technological revolution. Those who fought in that war could not have imagined what the world would be like at the end of this century.

Until the II World War, fathers taught the sons. Sons commonly went into the same profession of their fathers, or into related professions. But today that is rare. So the conclusion: the fathers have nothing to say to the sons, and the sons have nothing to learn from the fathers. How sad that is, if it's true.

Perhaps the greatest significance of Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*, is that it marks the time when the sons discovered that the fathers have something to teach them after all, something about loyalty, faithfulness, integrity, sacrifice, and humility. Those are the things that make life genuinely human in the first place. Those values are what life is all about. Ultimately life is about values. You discover that at the end of life, as you look back on your life. You are most proud of those things you did that brought out the best in you. Proud that when the storms came, that you had values to serve as the compass to get you through them.

You remember twenty years or so ago, Alex Haley's book, *Roots*, came out. It was a cultural phenomenon, especially the television series, and it captivated America, both black and white. Like *The Greatest Generation*, it celebrated people who experienced the worst that could ever happen to you, slavery, and met it with the best that was in them. The point of the story of *Roots* is that it was in large part the parents instilling the values of dignity and pride in the lives of the children through stories.

When the slaves first came from Africa they brought the storytellers with them. Storytellers held a high status in African society. The storytellers came to the colonies and told the stories of Africa, the stories of the fathers, brave and strong.

When the storytellers were no longer available, the preachers took their place. When the African stories were no longer accessible to them, the preachers turned to the Bible and told the stories of the Hebrew fathers. So they have always had images of greatness in front of them to enable them to meet the challenges and the tasks, the suffering and the pain, through examples of heroes before them.

I would therefore be so bold as to suggest that the reason for the lack of greatness in our life today, the reason that we are in this period of self-indulgence, is that we no longer have heroic images to guide us. In fact, we have come to a period where we try to knock down all heroes. If there is a folk hero in American life, somebody will write a book about that person and try and knock them off their pedestal. We have systematically tried to level all heroes, and we have paid a price for it. That price is a shallow culture, self-seeking, leading to meaningless lives.

I want to suggest that the Church is one of the few places left in American society that deals with the past with reverence. Here you can come and hear the stories of the fathers, and the mothers, clear back to Abraham and to Sarah. Hear about people who lived lives that have soared to the highest possible. Because we have not let go of the past. We still tell the stories of the past. We honor the fathers.

Out of the Conference this last week a young man gave a brilliant presentation in which he suggested that the Church had to change with the times. He said that the world has changed. We now live in a post-modern age, that is what he called it. He had other designations for it. All of which meant that the old ways of living in the world are no longer possible. We have to organize the institutions of the world in a new way now to take advantage of the knowledge that has come to us in this new day. If we are going to be relevant to the world, he said, as we enter the 21st century, then we are going to have to change.

I have reached the age where I don't receive that kind of word very happily. Although I have to admit, to a great extent, it is true. But as he was talking, I remembered a story told by a legendary professor in my seminary, a man named Pat McConnel. He said, "You know, I had an old rooster on the farm who used to crow every time the night train came by and shinned its light into the chicken coop, because he thought it was the dawn of a new day."

I suppose that every generation does that. I know I did that. I was sure that the times were unprecedented. These new, exhilarating ideas, these new movements in our time, surely the old is gone and the new has come. I, as a young person, was on the wave of a new future in this world.

Most people, I have discovered, who hail the dawn of a new day, lay an egg. The surface of things change. The technology that exploded in the mid-century has brought about a tremendous change in the way the world looks. In fact, it has changed the whole world. But the irony is that it has not made the old values irrelevant. On the contrary, it has made them more necessary.

That is the meaning of Brokaw's book. That is what he discovered. He announces not that these values represent something that we have outgrown, but something that we have lost and desperately need to recover. That is why he honors the fathers, because they embody those values in the way that they lived.

"Honor your father and your mother," is one of the Ten Commandments. What does it mean? Well some interpret it to mean that children are supposed to listen to their parents. Most parents who are still raising their children believe that's what it means. And it probably does. But it means much more. It means for all of us that parents ought to live lives that are worth honoring. They have the responsibility as parents to provide images of greatness for the children.

That doesn't mean that parents have to be perfect. No parent is perfect. I remember that wonderful essay written by Burt Prelutsky some years ago about his father on Father's Day. His father was an immigrant to this country. He labored day and night in menial jobs trying to make a living for his family. He went from job to job. He finally ended his working career as the proprietor of a cigar stand, in an office building in downtown Los Angeles. Prelutsky says his life was plain, hard-working, undistinguished, lackluster. He honored his father, not for his

worldly achievement, but for something much more important, for his character. He put it this way. "He was not a great man, but he was the best man that he could possibly be."

That is what we honor. That is all that is expected of us, that we be the best persons that we can be. On this Father's Day I would say that we fathers should be the best fathers that we can be, and that is enough.

Harper Lee honored her father in her book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It is the only book she ever wrote, incidentally. Her father was a small town lawyer, scorned by the people in that town because of the courageous stand he took. He was ignored by the rest of the world, nobody ever heard of her father. But he was a man of character, who in the worst possible circumstance, did the best that he knew how.

Who will ever forget that scene near the end of the book where the father, defeated in court, had won the more precious victory of maintaining the integrity of his life. The lawyer's name was Atticus Finch. His children were sitting in the balcony with the blacks. Blacks were not allowed on the first floor. The black preacher is sitting next to the children of Atticus Finch. As Finch walked out of the courtroom, the black preacher says to the children, "Stand up. Your father is passing by." Honor the fathers.

Or, Barbara Davis, who wrote this poem in honor of her father.

He planned for his life to be
A symphony
But it was a whisper
He stomped the earth
But made no footprints
On the yielding sands
How many knew
That he had come and gone?
My inheritance fit
In a manila envelope:
An old book, a Russian passport,
One cuff link
Unless you want to count
Love
That fashioned truth from golden wood
And beat its wings
Within a daughter's breast.

I close with our text for this morning from the Book of Joshua. Joshua took over for Moses. Moses freed the Jews from slavery in Egypt, took them across the desert for forty years, but he was not allowed to go into the Promised Land. He died on this side of the Jordan. He couldn't go across. Joshua was chosen to succeed Moses, and to take the Hebrew children across the Jordan. In our text Joshua says this.

Pass on to the River Jordan, and each one of you pick up a stone, and each from the bottom of

the river, and take it to the other side of the bank. Put the stones together to make a shrine, so that in future years, when your children and your children's children pass by here, they will ask, "What do these stones mean?" Then you can tell them [the stories of the fathers and of the mighty works of God, who worked through them.]

I suggest that Father's Day is such a shrine, because when we come to it each year, the children can ask, "What does this day mean?" And we can tell them stories about the fathers.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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