

June 16, 2019

Father's Day

Mark 4: 26-29

Prayer: Our heavenly Father, hear our prayer on this day set aside to honor our earthly fathers. Help these fathers in our midst to be more like you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

A D-Day Father's Day

Ten days ago, we commemorated the 75th anniversary of D-Day. It is likely the last such celebration in which D-Day veterans will participate.

If they fought there on the beaches of France at 18, they are 93 now. And that's the youngest of them.

I listened all week to coverage on NPR and ETV. What an amazing story of the Greatest Generation! Many of us had fathers who served in World War II, and their experiences colored the rest of their lives.

My dad had just turned 16 when Allied forces landed at Normandy on June 6, 1944, on those beaches code named Omaha, Utah, Gold, Juno and Sword. He read about another 24,000 airborne troops who landed behind enemy lines.

So the minute he turned 18, he signed up for the Army's paratrooper training. When he finished, the Army sent him to northern Japan as part of the Occupation Forces.

He didn't see the carnage of Normandy, and I'm so glad. Because according to those veterans who did see it, it was something they never forgot. Not for one single night.

A veteran named Jerry Dietch of Nevada was 18 when his combat demolition unit landed at Normandy. His job was to clear obstacles and blow up the enemy positions that could slow the Allied advance inland. He was still on the beach when a piece of shrapnel hit his helmet and left a fist-sized dent – and a concussion. Good friends fell all around him.

“I know exactly where I was when I was hit,” he said. “Exactly the spot. I see it in my mind all the time.”

For a lifetime, he never wanted to return to those beaches of France and he never did. Until 10 days ago.

Having kept his war to himself for 75 years, Dietch now thanks people for listening to his memories. “I feel better when I speak about it,” he said. “If you have demons, face them.”

Story after story after story sounds much the same. On the newspaper back in the 90s, we began collecting and running stories about our World War II veterans. And one theme was a constant. “I’ve never talked about this before, but....”

Russell Pickett was 19 when he came ashore on Omaha Beach with the 29th Infantry Division. He was wounded leaving his landing craft, sent back to a hospital in England, then returned to Normandy where he fought and was injured again.

Now 94, he says, “You live the war almost every night, you see? And you don’t get rid of it, no matter what you do. I would love to forget it, totally forget it, but no way, especially when you go through a battle like D-Day.”

One of the ETV documentaries took seven or eight paratroopers back to those green fields of France where they’d fought so hard to take a single bridge manned by German machine gunners. And to a man, what they talked about, was looking down and seeing all their friends, all their comrades, who lay dying.

Imagine an event that occurred when you were 18 or 19 or 20 that stayed with you every single day for the rest of your life. I imagine that was the case for many of your fathers.

People sometimes ask me what it's like to preach in this place. What they mean is how do you tailor messages for people with such different backgrounds, economic status, educations, and so forth.

But no subject is more difficult in this place than fathers. Because for everyone who had a Great Generation father who fills them with pride, someone else did not.

In this place, the subject of fathers is treacherous territory. For far too many, fathers are a source of pain and grief and loss and anger. Not for everyone, certainly. But for many.

To be homeless in Greenville or anywhere really, something has gone wrong. It may be a medical condition. It may be mental illness. It may be alcohol or drugs. But often, when we begin digging under alcohol and drug abuse, under injuries, under generational poverty, we find unresolved grief and pain and loss.

Grief from abandonment.

Pain from abuse.

Grief and pain and loss at the hands of the person who was supposed to love us best.

If you had a loving father, thank God for him. But if you did not, there can be healing, there can be relief, in the kingdom of God.

And the kingdom of God often, very often, breaks in on earth. We do not have to wait for heaven to achieve bits of the peace and healing of that kingdom.

I had a seminary professor who frequently remarked that when the kingdom of God breaks in on earth, it is marked by liberation.

He saw the kingdom of God breaking in when the Berlin Wall fell.

He saw the kingdom of God breaking in when the Soviet Union was dismantled.

He saw the kingdom of God breaking in when someone was healed of cancer, and doctors couldn't explain why.

The kingdom of God is always marked by liberation, sometimes in great, dramatic ways, sometimes in small, individual ways. The kingdom of God can be marked by liberation from the pain caused by an earthly father.

In our Scripture passage for today, Jesus tells a parable to describe this kingdom of God. It may not sound like he's talking about fathers or liberation, but let's read it and see. **MARK 4: 26-29.**

26 (Jesus) also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

As you know, Jesus talked about seeds and sowing a great deal. All the gospel writers tell us that. But this particular little parable, this odd little parable, is found only in Mark.

At this point in Mark's story, people asked Jesus all the time, *What is this kingdom of God you preach? What it's like?* And he answered with ordinary stories about things they knew. He answered with parables.

A parable made a good teaching tool: It took something the hearer knew – like seeds growing – and compared it to something he didn't know – like the kingdom of God. He could then imagine something of the kingdom because of something he already understood – the mysterious nature of agriculture.

But a parable worked on another level as well. Because it was generally about ordinary things, it allowed listeners to realize that the kingdom of God sometimes comes in ordinary ways.

“The Kingdom of God,” said Jesus, **“is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.”**

This parable deals with the all-powerful nature of God to bring in his kingdom. No church program, no preacher, no action on our part is going to bring it in.

The farmer in the parable sleeps and rises while the seed mysteriously sprouts and grows. **“The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.”** And the farmer sleeps and rises.

That same seminary professor once saw a sign outside a church that said, *“If we won't, God can't.”*

If we won't, God can't.

Well, that sent him right over the edge.

“God can't?” he yelled at us. *“God can't? Well, poor God!”*

His point was that God can do whatever God pleases ... whether we will or won't, can or can't. The earth produces of itself while we sleep and rise.

And yet the kingdom doesn't come completely without the efforts of the farmer, does it? He scatters the seed. And when the grain is ripe, he harvests.

The farmer participates. We participate. But God controls when and where and if and how the kingdom arrives.

This is liberation. We do not have to engineer our salvation. We are not responsible for bringing in the kingdom of God. We are told to be witnesses to Jesus Christ – to scatter the seed – but it will grow and sprout, we know not how.

This is liberation. We were born with the fathers we were born to, whether for good or bad. Psychologists tell us that girls, especially about the time of adolescence, receive their sense of self-worth from their fathers.

For some, that is a wonderful, affirming thing.

From time to time I've been invited to speak about homelessness or murder mysteries or volunteerism at Furman's OLLI program. That is the university's

fabulous curriculum for retirees. They offer everything from hiking to Jewish philosophers, from poker to Japanese history.

But this spring, an instructor invited me to talk about Feisty Women.

No, I thought, *the one you want is my daughter, Madison*. There's a print I gave Madison that hangs in her old bedroom. It shows a woman with wild red hair like hers. Beneath the picture are these words, "The woman who says it cannot be done -- should not interrupt the woman doing it."

But this spring Madison was in the Dominican Republic, and the OLLI instructor said I was feisty enough for her purposes. She wanted me to address the question: "Where did the spark come from?"

Well, that would've been easy even if Father's Day hadn't been approaching. I had a father who told me I could do anything, and who treated me as if I already had.

Some of us didn't get fathers like that. For some, fathers offered belittlement, if not outright abuse, and a resulting life of self-doubt and self-loathing.

Boys learn how to treat women, how to be husbands and fathers, by watching how their fathers treat their mothers.

For some, that is a healthy, life-affirming lesson. For others, it is a lesson in violence and screaming and nightmares, leading often to divorce and abandonment of their own children.

We do not have to wait for the final kingdom of God to heal these wounds. The kingdom of God is breaking in all the time to heal people and relationships and situations that we think are humanly unable to be healed. And humanly, they probably are.

But “the seed sprouts and grows, he does not know how.”

God can repair these psychic injuries. God can repair the damage a father has done to you. God can repair the damage that you are inflicting upon your children.

Because if you are not with your young children, chances are they are growing up with the same hurt and grief and loss that we’ve been talking about. Chances are that on Father’s Day 10 or 15 years from now, they will be undergoing the same pain that you are today.

We at Triune would like to help break that cycle. That’s what our pastors and rehab counselors and case managers are here for.

Ultimately, we know that the Holy Spirit is the only one who can break in the kingdom of God upon earth and liberate us from a lifetime of grief and pain. But there are psychological and psychiatric principles that can help. Just as those D-Day veterans have learned after 75 years of silence, there is release in sharing burdens.

If, on this Father's Day, you are burdened by grief over your father or guilt over your children, this might be a first step toward your healing. Don't let an imperfect father control the rest of your life.

For the kingdom of God is as if a human heart would be soothed, would be healed, and we do not know how.

Amen.