

Living with the Mystery Man
Rev. Kathleen Owens
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I want to say “Happy Father’s Day” to all of you who are fathers, dads or pops. Whether you are a male parent, or a person who acts as a protector or provider; if you are a founder or creator or in some way have brought something unique into being. These are some of the definitions for what a “father” is – and today is your day. Mother's day was started by our own Julia Ward Howe, who proclaimed that the mothers of the world should come together and say No to war – (and that's another sermon). But Father's Day – it was started intentionally as a way to pay honor and tribute to a father – “In the U.S., the first modern Father’s Day celebration was held on July 5, 1908 in Fairmont, West Virginia. It was first celebrated as a church service at Williams Memorial Episcopal Church. Grace Golden Clayton, who is believed to have suggested the service to the pastor, is believed to have been inspired to celebrate fathers after the deadly mine explosion that killed 361 men, many of them fathers and recent immigrants to the US from Italy.”

The greeting card company known as Hallmark has a lot to say on this day. And Hallmark has made it easy to pick a card quickly for that one, that person we honor. In the store, browsing at all the cards, I noticed various placards separating the hundreds of cards. For instance, From a Wife section had cards for a dad from the wife; there were many sections – from your daughter, from your son, from your daughter-in-law, for the father-in-law, and some were spiritual or humorous. There were even From the dog; from the cat sections. While I read many in all the sections I did skip those – my eyes were already weary with the bright colors and spring-action figures that jump from some cards.

Reading all of those cards, it was easy to see that the card makers have specific ideas about what a card should look like and who it should be given from...for instance the cards in the From a Daughter section, most of the cards were in soft colors with affirming messages of lessons learned and the love that is felt for him. The message, “I love you” was printed on many of the cards in fine script. Cards from the section From a Son – the colors were bold and maybe even a little hard, if color can express a feeling; and the messages were about appreciation and “thanks for the advice.” Not one card, that I saw anyway, had a son expressing his love for his father...The humorous ones – well they dealt mostly with tools and being a fix-it guy, and/or money, bodily noises and the TV remote.

Regardless of the relationship we currently have or do not have with that man called dad, when we were children – fathers were such giants in our lives, weren't they? Just in physical stature alone, they towered over us – with big hands and deep voices. There's a popular song played on some music stations called – “I've Been Watching You” – and it's about a four-year son who watches his dad and wants to grow up to be just like him. The chorus says, I've been watching you, dad, ain't that cool? I'm your buckaroo, I want to be like you. And eat all my food and grow as tall as you are. We got cowboy boots and camp pants, yea, we're just alike, hey, ain't we dad. I want to do everything you do. So I've been watching you.” (from Atkins Rodney)

And they do, don't they? In general, the little ones in our lives want to be like us. And for us, remembering if we were lucky, there was that charmed time, or maybe for some it was just a moment – that we felt connected to our fathers – when we were kids. Then as life happens, we grow and soon that giant with the big hands and deep voice has

become the guy who says "no" to us...who makes the rules, fairly or not and we must live by them (or not). Then we get to experience our fathers in a whole other way – as the poet described, our poems about our fathers are whole anthologies of poems that begin, “My father never,” Or those that end, “and he was silent as a carp,”

I have been thinking a lot about men and the role of fathers in our society and how we have learned and continue to pass on the lessons of what it means to be living with the label of father, or mother, son or daughter or to not live with those labels.

This sermon is titled, Living with the Mystery Man because it seems in our larger society it is extremely difficult to know, to learn who our fathers are: as people beyond the label or assumptions and expectations.

It’s only as adults, if we’re lucky that we get to see our parents as more than that – that we get to see them as people – with their own wishes and hopes, dreams and sorrows. Seeing them as such can complicate our picture of who they were and are in our lives. A friend of mine was so angry at his dad – and it was easy to hold on to the image of his dad as someone who was mean and sometimes hateful to him when he was a boy. He carries the memory of the time when the whole family went at an amusement park and being the oldest, he was expected to ride the rollercoaster with everyone else. His younger siblings were going to ride it along with his dad, but he didn’t want to – he was afraid and started to cry. His dad teased him for crying and then yelled at him for being a baby. His dad got mad at him and left the child crying in line while he joined the others. He told me his aunt came to him and through his tears he asked, why was his dad so mean to him? What he didn’t know at the time, and I still don’t know if he fully understands that his dad had never learned that it was okay to be scared, to cry – that

somewhere within his own life his dad had learned not to do those things and now he didn't want his son to either. Knowing that doesn't help or heal the hurt – but it does allow for a fuller picture of who his dad is – and maybe a hint of why he is like he is.

Again, it's similar to the poem we heard earlier. Some of us grew up without a father or dad in the house and some of us grew up with him in the house – but only his physical presence because he was overworked trying to provide for his family...and whose absence was his presence. For twenty-two years my dad was a fireman for the city of Portage, Indiana. He worked a schedule of being on duty for 24 hours and off duty for 48 hours. There were times in the early years where he had a second job and so was working during his 48 hours off from the fire station. During a conversation a couple of summers ago, we were talking about his fire fighting days and he said being a fireman for 22 years meant he spent a total of seven years away from us while we were growing up. I was surprised by that knowledge...and that he had figured it out. Growing up it never occurred to me that he thought about his job like that – as time spent away from his family. And I learned in as an adult that he never wanted to be a fireman. He took the job because it was a good paying job and he needed to provide for his family. And it's only now – as an adult that he is in some ways no longer a mystery man but someone I know as a real person.

I know part of the reason for the mystery is because parents and children have different roles, different functions in the family and some knowledge about a parent cannot be known until the child becomes an adult. But there is a deeper part of living with the mystery man – and it seems to me that our society doesn't encourage, even as adults, for us to know our fathers, the men in our lives, as 3-dimensional individuals...but

only as labels, Hallmark's version what who a dad is – the fix-it guy with the TV remote; or someone to rebel against, to react to – to leave – when, as the poet says, they [dads themselves] are wondering why we disappeared as soon as we got our licenses...and that they should have knocked us down with a hand on our shoulders, that they too are mystified by the distance men need in their love.

Do they need distance in their love? Why? How is it that this is so? Maybe because I am a female, I do not understand – is it a male thing? I question that – especially since into my adult years I have met many men who share their feelings openly, who love and support other men, who seem not to need a distance...and yet, one of the worst names a guy can be called by his friends, is gay. It's still a derogatory term – just because you happen to express your feelings and show another guy that you care.

I wonder where did we get the idea of living with distance; of living with an absent father? Literature is filled with stories of the hero riding off alone into the sunset...or of the young man's pilgrimage to find himself – wandering alone or flanked only by a close friend, or a horse. Tracing our literary history back to the oral history and religious history we find in Christianity the figure of God symbolized as a father and he is a father that is never seen, only heard from, only talked about really. There are only a few stories that involve fathers in those scriptures. The term father is mostly connected to God.

And some have questioned if God is a good role model. From the book, *God is a Verb* – by Rabbi David Cooper: (page 73) writes "As long as we relate to god a father and we as children, we sustain the dysfunctional paternalistic model in which father

knows best. We not only remain alienated with a sense of abandonment, we relinquish our personal sense of responsibility. We think father will take care of everything."

In Judaism, as far as I know, though the concept of the Divine has many qualities, God as father is not one of them. And in the Hebrew scriptures there are numerous examples of the kinds of fathers that can exist in the world. Some are challenging to come to terms with – Lot who offered his daughters to an angry crowd in order to protect strangers; Laban who secretly married his oldest daughter Leah to Jacob when he really was in love with her little sister Rachel; Abraham took his young son Isaac up the mountain and to offer him as a sacrifice to his god - among many others.

If art imitates reality and reality reflects art, what does that say about our understanding and expectations of fathers? I'm not here to bash fathers – on the contrary, I want to acknowledge who they are – as real people and that they struggle with the various labels and unrealistic expectations society puts on them – that we put on them. And I want to hold up and honor people who live beyond, who live outside of labels and structures that keep them at a distance, that keep them separated from those who love them and only want more of their time and attention.

Author Neil Chethik writes in his book *Fathers, Son, and Loss: What We Can Learn* that what the sons he interviewed mostly wanted from their fathers was affection. And it didn't have to be physical – though if it was, say through hugs or kisses or even wrestling – it often had a strongly favorable effect on the child. But he points out that affection could be any behavior that showed loving attention toward his son. (UU World.org.2001.01.chethik.html). Author May Pipher writes that "one of the best things

daughters can get from their fathers is seeing how much their fathers respect women. .."
and sons need it too. (ibid)

Dads today live with a lot of pressure to provide (which usually now takes 2 incomes), to play with their kids, to discipline them, to coach, to help with home and homework, to be a source of strength and to protect. There are a lot of labels and expectations we have of dad. Recent studies echo what ancient texts have known and taught all along – that one of the most important things a father can do for his children, whether they are young adults or adults – is to bless them. The Hebrew scriptures are filled with these acts and they have power. Strained relationships between fathers and children can begin to heal with the power of a blessing. An acknowledgement of the choices a child has made and the that life he or she has created is a good one – this act can be filled with meaning and can be an on-going gift.

Growing up in my family we always said grace before our meals. And when we were with my grandparents the grace was usually longer and more formal. If we were at my grandparents house, my grandfather usually asked my dad to say grace. When they visited us, my dad would usually ask my grandpa to say it. One summer while I was still in seminary, I went back to Indiana for a family gathering at my parents house. My grandpa had come up with my aunt and some cousins, my sisters and their families were there and we all had a cookout. When it came time to eat the meal, because my dad was hosting, he asked my grandpa to say the blessing for the meal. Everyone got quiet and then my grandpa quietly said, I think Kathleen should say grace. My dad gently made room for me beside grandpa – and I was stunned - here was my southern Baptist grandpa, in his late 80s inviting me to pray out loud. I stepped up and said a pray – to this day, I

have no idea what I said. After I was finished, people began filling their plates and my grandpa put his hand on my back and patted me – he said I did a good job. It was a moment of blessing – that he gave me, that he gave my life's work. Though my faith tradition did not agree with his, he still blessed me. I was deeply moved – and when I recall that memory – I still am.

We adults – be we fathers or mothers, aunts or uncles or some label not yet named, we who have children in our lives – two of the best things we can do for them are to offer them our affection and our blessing. Receiving my grandpa's blessing gave me a sense of confidence I didn't know I lacked – until I had it. When my father has told me how proud he is of me – that reinforces my value and confidence in myself, in others and in the world at large.

Our relationships can be so complex. If you haven't yet read the novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson – I commend it to you. It is a moving tribute to fathers and sons – their lives, relationships; and it is more than that – it is a story that speaks to us all. It is a book about forgiveness and blessings that help make meaning out of our lives. It is a story that is lived out every day – if we choose it.

We here in this community have the power to bless others. To create a place and time and space for our young to have more confidence and to live more fully in the world. It is here we give ourselves to each other – in ways that are safe and affirming. In ways that allow for fewer labels as we open our hearts to each other, as we open into deeper community and connection. And isn't this the kind of world we're striving to create – and thus we “father” something better into being. May we learn to release painful memories and unrealized expectations, may we grow to see each other – and those in our

families as whole, 3 dimensional human beings; may we begin to heal and bless one another – especially our children so that they – that we all may go forth and live fully.

Amen.