

“Fathers: Catalysts For Maturity”

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2 Corinthians 12:14-15

The idea for a day when children can honor their fathers began in Spokane, Washington. A woman by the name of Sonora Smart Dodd thought of the idea for Father's Day while listening to a Mother's Day sermon in 1909. After her mother died she was raised by her father, William Jackson Smart and wanted him to know how special he was to her.

It was her father that made all the parental sacrifices. In her eyes, he was a courageous, selfless, and loving man. He was born in June, so Sonora chose to hold the first Father's Day celebration in Spokane, Washington on the 19th of June.

In 1926, a National Father's Day Committee was formed in New York City. Father's Day was recognized by a Joint Resolution of Congress in 1956, and in 1972, President Richard Nixon established a permanent national observance of Father's Day on the third Sunday of June each year.

So Father's Day was born in the memory and gratitude of a daughter who thought that her father, and all good fathers, should be honored with a special day just as we honor our mothers on Mother's Day.

Father's Day is the recognition of the important role fathers play in families.

The value we place on fathers and family is also an important foundation for Christian community.

It was around the importance of family that the Apostle Paul framed his relationship with the people with whom he was ministering when starting churches around the Mediterranean Sea in the first century.

On one of his missionary journeys, Paul established a church in the city of Corinth, a significant port city in south-central Greece.

Establishing a church didn't mean building a big building where people from all over the city would come each Sunday to worship.

In those days (and a good case can be made that it works the same today) starting a church was about developing relationships with people, helping them to

understand the history of the faith, listening and watching for how God works, and establishing patterns for how the people can relate as a family with God at the center. In addition, starting a church was about instilling in a people what it means to care for the poor and those most in need in the community.

As Paul started churches, the people met and worshiped regularly in synagogues and more often in homes as they integrated faith into all aspects of life.

Paul's pattern was to start a church in a community and stay with them, sometimes for several years, and then moved on to the next place to do the same as the Holy Spirit led him. He would then come back to visit repeatedly to help them resolve community problems and to mature in their faith.

The letters we have from Paul in our New Testament, were written in the first century to various communities where he had established churches.

We have two of the letters that Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. I am going to read only a couple of verses to give you the flavor for how Paul understood his relationship with the people of the Corinthian church.

Notice how Paul sees himself as a father to the young Christians there.

READ 2 COR. 12:14-15

In a Greco-Roman context, family name and financial stability was extremely important. The father was responsible for generating money and recognition for the family name. This stability and position could then be passed down to the children when they were mature enough to themselves contribute to the family in the same way.

It was not the children's role to save up for their parents, but rather to learn wisdom and grow in maturity from their father and his example.

When he planted churches, Paul didn't want a system of hierarchy where he was this benevolent distant ruler who required that they, as subordinates, support him financially. No, he wanted a much more intimate family relationship with them.

Paul embraced the idea that his role was to mentor new Christians who were young in the faith. He saw himself as a father to them, who would give to them selflessly, without expectation for them to give back.

The tone in this passage gives us a sense that he was probably defending his more intimate fatherly intentions because there were some who didn't understand, thinking that he was in it for the money or had selfish motives.

I'm going to speak to you fathers out there, but of course mothers can relate as well. All of you fathers out there can probably relate to a time (likely multiple times) when you have had in mind only love for your children when you did something like set limits for your kids around bed time, TV time, trips out with friends, or some other activity.

But at those moments, of course your children could only see that you were being unjust, unfair, and maybe even cruel. They let you know about their dissatisfaction through tantrums, yelling, crying or some other demonstration of revolt.

Your kids had not grown mature enough to understand why you set the boundary. But you, as the father, had a sense of perspective beyond the tantrum, and it was clear that your heart and intentions were coming from the core of love. You had set the boundary to both protect the safety of your children as well as nurture them into greater maturity.

Paul had a similar intention. He wished for the Corinthians to grow into greater faith maturity, even if at the moment they might not fully understand what he was doing.

In fact, as the father to the Corinthian church, his love had called him to sacrifice and give everything of himself to create the best possible environment for them to grow into maturity.

He was setting an example that would be paid forward to the next generation. Those who were immature in the faith, when they grew to maturity, would be able to give to the new members of the family and on through the coming generations.

In fact, this is the pattern of growing and maturing in the faith that is alive in the church today and why we have our Foundations of Faith Team.

With the Corinthians as well as other communities, Paul was reinforcing the idea that growing in maturity is an important dynamic in family relationships as well as in Christian community.

Because of the importance of fathers and family relationships, I have been troubled this past week by how families are being torn apart by kids who are being

separated from their parents at the US-Mexican border. This is happening through new policies and new interpretation and enforcement of older policies.

This is not a political statement, but a human dignity and justice issue.

The separation of children from parents is not only happening for people coming to this country without documentation. It is also happening to families who are legally here and seeking to apply for asylum.

Due to the current government policy change, it is clear that at the southern border they have quickly outgrown the capacity to house the several thousand children that have been separated from their parents and there currently does not seem to be a clear plan for how to reunite these children.

Remember, these young and innocent children coming here as refugees or asylum seekers have already been traumatized when leaving the only place they have known as home, because it was not safe for them to live there. Now they are being traumatized again by being separated from their parents and held in facilities where they sometimes will cry all night wondering where their parents are.

These children are needlessly being emotionally scarred as the only source of comfort they have had is being removed for who knows how long. These are the bonds with fathers and mothers that are so crucial for them to grow to maturity as human beings and people of faith.

What will the cost be of this horrendous practice to their future generations?

This congregation has had a relationship with Freedom House in Detroit. Several people from our congregation visited there yesterday morning to learn more about their operation.

This is an organization that specifically serves those seeking asylum in the United States. They are the only organization in the United States that offers the kind of breath of services to this population free of charge, including: housing, food, legal services, medical and mental health services, language services, education, job training, recreation, transportation, and more.

There is some confusion about who are asylum seekers. Asylum is a legal immigration status awarded by the U.S. government to people who meet the definition of a refugee but are already in the United States. A refugee is a

person who has suffered persecution or fears he or she will suffer persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group and/or political opinion in their home country.

Some asylum seekers who are legally following the process that our government has put in place are now being targeted and their children taken away.

This past week, some government officials have attempted to use the Bible (inappropriately) to validate this practice of separating children from parents. They have cited Romans 13 arguing that people need to submit to their government's law. When I heard this rhetoric this week, I was deeply troubled as were many other Christians throughout this country.

In our Bible are many stories from the Old to the New Testament imploring us to welcome the stranger and the refugee and care for those being oppressed. These children are just such a population.

The General Secretary of American Baptist Churches USA wrote a letter two days ago to the United States Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, that captures my grave

concern over this issue. I would like to read you his letter.

June 15, 2018

Mr. Jeff Sessions, Attorney General
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530-0001

Dear Attorney General Sessions, I am writing to you today on behalf of the 5,000 congregations and 1.3 million members of the American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA). As General Secretary, I serve as the national pastor of the denomination. ABCUSA has a long and distinguished record of service in welcoming immigrants and refugees to communities throughout the United States.

The American Baptist family would like to communicate our deep concern over the unjust immigration policies of the United States government, and in particular, the unconscionable separation of children from their parents on our southern border. As a fellowship of Christ followers who recall the trials of the child Jesus and his parents, who fled from persecution in their homeland to another country (Matthew 2:13-18), we adamantly oppose separating children from their relatives. A just society can fulfill its fidelity to its own laws and border security

without resorting to such unwise and harmful practices; instead, we urge that compassion, fairness and family-affirming policies characterize our response to the plight of families on our borders. We note that destructive practices such as the separation of children from parents place a serious burden on our law enforcement agents and officials, who in carrying out such policies find their own consciences ethically compromised and troubled.

Furthermore, we strongly disagree with your erroneous appropriation of the New Testament (in particular, Romans 13) to justify inhumane and unjust governmental actions. No responsible Christian theologian would assert that Romans 13, or any other passage in the Bible, supports the horrific separation of children from parents that we are witnessing at the present time. In fact, both the Old and New Testaments call those who believe in God to welcome refugees and immigrants with open arms and friendship, with loving care and concern, and with the willingness to assist others in enjoying the prospects of a future based on hope and opportunity.

Accordingly, American Baptists wish to express our sincere hope that the separation of children and parents will immediately cease. We

urge Congress and the President to approve and implement without delay more compassionate and just immigration policies and procedures. As the leading law enforcement official of our government, it is your privilege and responsibility to lead such an effort. Thank you for considering our position.

Sincerely,
Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer, General
Secretary
American Baptist Churches USA

Fathers hold an important role in families to help bring maturity, blessing and hope for the future. If fathers and mothers are not there especially at crucial transition times, an important and vital piece is missing.

Let us pray along with Dr. Lee Spitzer that the place of fathers and all parents is preserved especially for immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.