

Father's Day Message 2020
"Truths My Father Taught Me"
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First Christian Church, Murray, KY



This sermon has been written for Father's Day to honor both my own biological father, Professor Herbert W. Richardson, who is now 88 years old, and lives in Niagara Falls, Canada, and also to honor God, my true, eternal spiritual father.

Proverbs 22:6 ~ *Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.*
(NRSV)

Matthew 6:9-13 ~ ⁹*Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.* ¹⁰*Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.* ¹¹*Give us this day our daily bread.* ¹²*And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.* ¹³*And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.*
(NRSV)

One thing that the coronavirus pandemic has reminded me is how very precious life is and how people can be taken from us in an instant. Because of that, this Father's Day Sunday, I would like to share a sermon I have written to honor both my own biological father, Herbert W. Richardson, who is now 88 years old, and lives in Canada, and also to honor God, my true, eternal spiritual father. I hope that all of you also will use today to honor the father figures in your own lives as well as God our father, who, no matter what may happen in our own lives here on earth, will always be with us both in this world and the next.

My biological father, an ordained Presbyterian minister, publisher, and scholar, is both a brilliant and a very controversial man. He was always willing to stand by his own spiritual and ethical principles and take on unpopular causes. This led to him actually losing his job as a tenured university professor just a few years before his retirement. It is a story that relates to his treatment by the previous Pope Benedict XVI, when he was still known as Bishop Joseph Ratzinger. In fact, there have been numerous articles and at least one book written about this, one of which I have here which is called "*The Pope versus the Professor*," with my own biological father being the professor mentioned in the title. And this briefly is the story behind it.

Most of the first eleven years of my life I lived in a neighborhood close to Harvard University in Boston, where my father was a rising star on the faculty of their Divinity School. At that time Protestants and Catholics kept each other at arm's length and there was very little ecumenical activity. (Ecumenical means: promoting or relating to unity among the world's Christian churches.) That began to change under the direction of Pope Paul VI, who called for greater ecumenical activity at the Second Vatican Council. In 1968, in response to this call from the Pope, the Roman Catholic St. Michael's College within the University of Toronto, decided to call their first Protestant theologian to their all-Catholic faculty.

This was an unprecedented historic appointment within the entire Roman Catholic Church, carefully watched, applauded, and written about all over the world. The person they called was my father. So off to Canada we went. For many decades, my father's professorship went well. Over the years he taught over 6,000 under grad, grad, and continuing education students. He won teaching awards, developed new courses never taught before, directed more dissertations than anyone ever had before, wrote many books and articles, and managed to build and oversee what became an international publisher of scholarly books.

He was involved in all kinds of interesting activities, fighting against racism, sexism, and the rights of minority religions. But then, in the late 1980s, both the Southern Baptists and the Roman Catholics got nervous about new ideas be introduced and there was a swing toward conservatism. The Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic upper judicatories went to their seminaries and demanded that their professors sign doctrinal statements. Those who did not sign these were ousted.

The head of the theology department at St. Michael's College (under the direct orders of Bishop Ratzinger, later to become Pope Benedict) came to my father and gave him a doctrinal statement to sign. My father said, "Wait! I'm a Presbyterian! That's why you hired me. To bring ecumenism and diversity to this faculty. Why in the world would you ask me to sign a Roman Catholic doctrinal statement?" The response was "Submit your teaching to the authority of the bishops or be fired!" When my father wouldn't sign the doctrinal statement, even though he was tenured, they tried to force him to leave by offering financial settlements and early retirement. He demanded instead that his case be brought before a public legal hearing. Before the legal hearing, a process we call "mobbing" began, where they tried to find any evidence against him (including things as trivial as turning out lights); people turned against him; and it all became very personal.

This public trial, which took place in Toronto in 1994, was covered extensively by the media because, in reality, he wasn't the only person who was on trial, but the faculty and administration and, indeed, the Roman Catholic church were as well. It was a very painful time for our entire family because not just his professional but also his personal life were free game in the questions that were posed and shared with the public. My parents had divorced four years earlier; my father had a new wife from Japan and two little babies. Even questions about his divorce and remarriage and us children were brought up.

Ultimately, after a valiant legal battle that was played out sometimes on the front pages of the Toronto Globe and Mail, he lost, and packed up his office at St. Michael's College where he had been for over three decades. Anyway, during the trial, he was asked why he had been willing to undergo such a painful process in which his life was examined in the mean-spirited way it was. He replied that **"I chose to go through this so that my children would be proud of me, and that is what it finally came down to."**

In 2003, I served as the editor for a book called “*The University of Toronto Dismissal Trial of Professor Herbert Richardson,*” which contains the complete transcript of the trial. In my preface I wrote:

“I am very proud of my father. I am proud of his achievements as a scholar, a teacher, for his many innovations in the area of adult education, for his defense of minority religions, for his contributions in the fields of ethics and ecumenism, for the many dissertations he has overseen, and the important role he has played in the lives of countless students. I am proud that he founded, in the basement of our home when I was a child, what soon would become a successful international publishing company that has helped facilitate the publication of research of thousands of scholars around the world. However, I am perhaps most proud of his being a model of courage in the face of adversity. I have drawn strength from his courage in many instances. It would be my hope that others might draw strength from his courage as well.” Ruth Richardson Ragovin, Ph.D., Sparta, TN, June 2003.

So the first important truth I learned from my father is that of **courage**. The courage to speak one’s truth and follow one’s own unique path. I can tell you that courage was not always easy to muster for a young girl who very early felt called to ministry at a time when there was not one single female role model I could look to for guidance and inspiration. In fact, in the first grade my teacher in Boston asked us to draw a picture of what we wanted to be when we grew up. I drew a picture of myself in a black ministerial robe with a Bible in my hand, preaching. My teacher was so alarmed by this that she went and talked to my parents. Now if I had drawn myself as a Catholic nun that would have been okay; but to draw myself dressed in what was understood to be traditional male religious garments was a problem. She thought there was something wrong with me; that I was transgender or at least very confused. My father merely laughed at her comments and **en-couraged** me in my spiritual quest. That word, encouraged, means to help another find one’s courage.

He encouraged me when I dropped out of high school for awhile and drove overland in a vw van from Germany to Nepal, was gone for over a year, and almost died. He encouraged all my spiritual seeking through my agnostic, atheistic, Jesus Freak, social activist, Anabaptist pacifist, and very early break with his beloved Presbyterian Church (of which he was an ordained elder) to join with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) because I completely disagreed with their doctrinal orientation, their view of child baptism, and understanding of predestination (at least the way it was explained to me at

that time). And he encouraged me when, as the only one of his children from his first marriage who was interested in the study of religion, I chose not to follow in his footsteps by studying either medieval or American theology (his two great loves) but chose to do contemporary, German theology, and world religions instead. In each of these stages he encouraged me and got interested in what I was interested in. He opened up worlds to me and I opened up worlds to him. There have been times in my ministry when I have followed and spoken out publicly about unpopular justice issues that could also have caused me to fall out of favor in my church or community (and probably did!) but I was able to stand firm in my theological convictions related to radical inclusion because of the courage that he and the Jesus that I follow modeled.

A second important truth that my father taught me was **radical respect** for all people. In my home growing up there were never disparaging remarks made about anyone. There were never ethnic slurs or even innocent joking about others. I was shocked when I would hear such statements in other people's homes. At a time when blacks and whites were segregated, my father (who had studied at Boston College when Martin Luther King also was a seminarian there) made sure that we had black friends in our home. I remember having a sleep over at the home of my little black friend who lived down the street when I was about four years old and the neighbors being appalled. At a time when Protestants did not interact socially with Catholics, or Jews, or those of other religious traditions, my parents did so without missing a beat. At a time when homosexuality was not discussed at all, and even was categorized as a form of mental illness in psychiatric manuals, my father had a gay friend. Because my father grew up in a blue-collar home in Cleveland, Ohio, where there was never much money, the poor and those who were struggling were respected, as were those of other social classes. All of this was a huge gift to me, especially since respect was not something talked about but it was something that was lived out for us kids to see. I realize that respect is something, more than anything, we learn by osmosis in the environment in which we are raised.

A third important truth that my father taught me is the **value of suffering**. Even during pandemics, times of economic hardship, and social upheaval when people take to the streets, we need not fear the valleys and the shadows of life but should see them as places where we can be strengthened and important lessons can be learned. The dark places are the incubators of wisdom and truth, the refiner's fire, so let's use this moment in our nation's history as a time to become wiser and more compassionate.

Most importantly, though, he taught me four **foundational things about God** and the spiritual realm when I was still a child that have stayed with me and inform what I believe to be true and help me see the truth in Proverbs 22:6 where it says: *Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.*

I've mentioned all of them before at one point or another in my preaching but have never talked about them all together. **The first has to do with our communicating with and sensing God's presence in our lives in a visceral way.** When we were little kids we were taught to a few prayers. The first was the Lord's Prayer (we used trespasses); the second was Psalm 23 (we still used the King James Version); and the third was Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science bedtime prayer, which came down to him through his mother's parents, which goes:

Father-Mother God,
Loving me, —
Guard me when I sleep;
Guide my little feet
Up to Thee.

We would say these on our knees beside our bunk beds. The words to these prayers remain so important and inform my theology to the extent that I've often thought that parents really need not only to teach their children prayers but also to pick them carefully, for whatever understanding of God is in them will stay with them their entire lives. However, even more important than these spoken prayers, were the times when he would gather us around him and say, alright kids, close your eyes. I want you to feel God. Can you feel God? Can you feel God? And all of us would concentrate and at some point some of us might say, "Yes, Dad! I feel God! I feel God!" It was really quite remarkable! I realize that he taught us not only the now popular practice of mindfulness where we could shut out the world and silence our monkey minds but he also taught us how to locate the spiritual core of our being, which, like a spiritual antennae, can pick up the God frequency.

He also taught me about what the Presbyterians call "**divine providence,**" or God's creative activity in our lives. My father told us that we should wake up and greet each day like it was Christmas, with many gifts to unpack. If we looked and expected it, God would show up everywhere!

My father believed that God brought people into his life. He believed that God brought him ways to earn additional money when he needed it. He even believed that God found him parking places in downtown Boston and Toronto! And I also came to believe in what I call the divine unfolding of our lives; that there is an intermixing between the physical and the spiritual realms of life and that every day can be like Christmas, full of surprises and encounters with grace if we expect it and look for God in the people and events around us.

He also taught me about a doctrine that we Protestants don't talk about much: the "**communion of the saints**." This is the teaching that after people die and return to the spiritual realm (are in the Father's Mansion in heaven), they are still very much with us. He said we should envision our lives here on earth as though we are living our lives out in the playing field of a sport's arena. When I was a child I imagined it to be a basketball stadium, since we often went to see the Boston Celtics play, but it can be any kind of stadium. Anyway, all of us who are living are out on the playing field of the stadium, living out our lives, at home, at school, at work, at play. And all the people in the stands are those who have passed on and they are actively watching what is going on down below and cheering all of us on. He felt very connected to his own mother after her death, very much sensing her ongoing presence in his life.

Finally, and most importantly of all, he taught me that **my true Father on whom I should rely was not my biological father but rather my Father in heaven**. He would remind us of this when we prayed the Lord's Prayer, saying "*Our Father, who art in heaven ...*" Because he taught me this spiritual truth, when he, as my earthly father, no longer was in my life, I was not left orphaned. I was left with the rich legacy of all the important spiritual truths that he, my biological father, had taught me, and I was left in the care of my true spiritual Father and the love that will never let me go. My Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by Your name, above the name of all the fathers on our earth ...

My prayer today, on Father's Day, is that we will all find ways to honor our biological fathers, who, because they are merely human, are a mixture of both good and bad qualities, all those who have served as fatherly figures in our lives, and, above all, our heavenly Father, who art in heaven, whose name is hallowed, to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance, who has called us each of into being, who will never leave us orphaned, and to whom we will ultimately return in our eternal home.

Let us pray: *“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done – on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”*