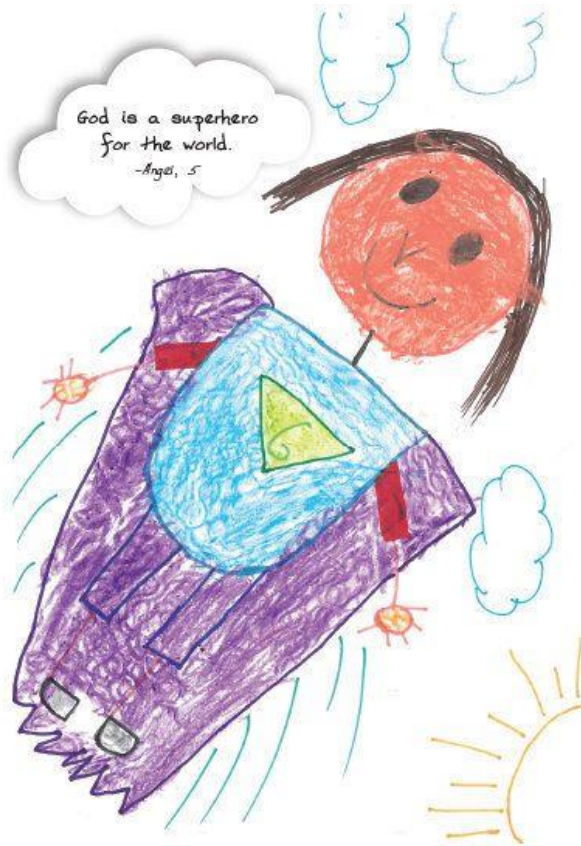


The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost ~ June 20, 2021
“you are ALL children of God”
A Sermon for Father’s Day based on Galatians 3:26-29
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin
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Galatians 3:26-29

²⁶For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whom a number of us had the privilege of hearing a number of years ago at MSU, was interviewed by *Time* magazine. One of the questions they asked him was “What achievement are you most proud of?” I thought he was going to say something like, “helping end Apartheid in South Africa,” or “getting the Nobel peace prize” or “the books that I have written”. But you know what he said? He said the achievement he was most proud of was “becoming a father.” He said “The day I was told our son, who was our first, was born, I felt a little like God. Wonderful.”¹ In his book *Made for Goodness*, which he co-authored with his daughter Mpho Tutu, he wrote about this event:

*“I dropped the phone and ran two miles along the dusty streets to my parents’ house. Racing through the warm midmorning, I could not contain my joy. “A son! We have a son.” In South Africa in 1956, birth was exclusively a woman’s domain. There was no place for me to wait or to pace at the hospital, and so, controlling my anxiety, I stayed away. The Krugersdorp hospital was quite a distance from Munsieville, the black township where we lived. With my work schedule and no car, daily visits were out of the question. Telephones in the black township were far and few between. This one, at Nurse Belle’s house, was the only one for miles around. On the morning after Leah was admitted to the hospital I made my first worried pilgrimage to the telephone to learn of her progress. And now the hours of anxious waiting were washed away in a flood of elation and a surge of boundless love. Our blessing, our Thomasanqa, was born. Without as much as a glimpse of his face or a whiff of his milky breath I was in love. **In the birth of this child I experienced something of the love of God.** I experienced what it was to love without measure or merit. There was nothing for this child to do to earn my love. With his first breath he had captured my heart. I loved him because he was. I loved him for being.”²*

Fatherhood: loving without measure or merit. Loving a child just because that child is.

We know that God is beyond our human ability to comprehend. “What does God look like?” is one of the first theological questions children ask. I was delighted when I returned home to find the newly published and beautifully illustrated book I purchased for our church library by the recently deceased Rachel Held Evans and her friend Matthew Paul Turner entitled *What is God Like?* It begins by saying: “*What is God like?*”

¹ “10 Questions,” in *Time* March 22, 2010: 4.

² Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness and Why This Makes a Difference* (NY: HarperOne, 2010), 19-20.

That's a very big question, one that people from all places all around the world have wondered about since the beginning of time. And while nobody has seen all of God (because God is far too big for any of us to fully see), we can know what God is like."³ In the most beautiful illustrations, God is variously described as being like an eagle, a river, the stars, a shepherd, a fort, a gardener, the flame of a candle, the wind, an artist, a best friend, and more. It ends by saying *"whenever you aren't sure what God is like, think about what makes you feel safe, what makes you feel brave, and what makes you feel loved. That's what God is like."* It is because of this that one of the ways that God is described is as a "father, gentle and safe."

If you ever ask children to draw pictures of God you will discover some insightful theology. The most common picture is of God as an old man with a beard sitting up in the clouds. I love the depiction on the first page of my sermon with God as a superhero in a superman costume. But the best one I've ever seen is one that a little girl drew and said that since she did not know what God looked like, she decided to draw a picture of her Daddy. Again, there is this correlation between being a human father and God. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that when he became a father he felt a little like God, I guess both because of the part he played in bringing about a new creation and also because of the unconditional love that swelled up in him. And in the little girl's mind the most wonderful thing in her life was her Daddy so God must be just like him.

We want to use the highest language and the most beautiful pictures we can to depict God and it would seem that the most powerful image that Christians come up with in our patriarchal society is that God is a father. And Jesus used the same imagery. He called God not just his father, but Abba, Daddy, a father for whom there is affection and closeness. That makes me think he must have had an especially loving, close, and respectful relationship with his earthly father Joseph. Furthermore, Jesus told us that when we pray to God the language that we are to use is "Our Father, who art in heaven ..." God is depicted as our father, our heavenly father."

I used to think that mothers had the most important influence on their children, and their daughters in particular. I changed my mind when, in 1994, I was hired by the government to launch a pilot project called "Healthy Start" in one of the poorest counties in Tennessee. My job was to work with at-risk first-time teen mothers who had been abused and, as such, were at high risk for abusing their own children.

³ Rachel Held Evans and Matthew Paul Turner, *What is God Like?* (Convergent, 2021). Illustrated by Ying Hui Tan.

I accompanied these teen girls through their pregnancies, birth, and the first year of her child's life. It was then, working with these at-risk teens, that I realized how important fathers are in the lives of their daughters. A girl's healthy sense of esteem and worth is more directly linked to the way she is treated by her father than any one else in her life.

This was in the days when there was a book by Bruce Feirstein called *"Real Men Don't Eat Quiche: A Guidebook to All That is Truly Masculine."* Any of you remember that book? It prompted a slew of "real men sayings" about what "real men" do. Things like "real men do dishes" and "real men change diapers." I've only ever put one bumper sticker on my car and that was back then. The bumper sticker said, **"Real men are good fathers."** I stand by that saying to this day.

You know how proud I am of my daughter Rachel, who will turn thirty-one this upcoming Friday. I wish I could say that her good qualities are because of my mothering. And yes, I do think that I have been a good mother for the most part. In fact, I just returned from a week nursing her back to health after a sudden severe onset illness that left her seeking emergency medical care. Our parenting is a life-long task. No matter how old they are, they are still our babies. But I truly believe that the major credit for Rachel having grown up to be a strong, independent woman is because Russ has been a good father, who has loved her unconditionally and has tried to see her through the eyes of God and to call forth the best in her.

We are a very close family and Rachel will often call to talk to us. When things are going well, she usually wants to talk to me. But I notice that when she has a problem, it's "Can I talk to Dad? Put Dad on the phone." Sometimes she'll be driving in her car and the phone will ring and she'll say, "Hi Mom. I'm having car problems. I need to talk to Dad." But sometimes it isn't about car problems but important life issues. Rachel called me a few weeks ago. "Hi honey," I said. "Mom, this is serious. I need to talk to Dad." I actually never found out what the problem was since they have a relationship that is independent from the one that I have with her and I respect that each of us has unique wisdom to share but I know that whatever he told her was helpful.

Fathers are important in the lives of their daughters. And fathers are just as important in the lives of their sons. Real men are good fathers. But always remember, as the old saying goes, "No matter how you teach a child, he insists on behaving like his parents." So be very careful what you are modeling for your children, even when they are adults.

Unfortunately, it is a fact that there are many people who, when they might be asked to draw a picture of God, might not draw a picture of their own father or even anything positive at all. Many of us come from broken families where there was either no father or a difficult father from whom we did not receive much support. And, unfortunately, our views of our own fathers can sometimes get in the way of our view of God. We can project onto God the anger and disappointment we have at our human fathers and vice versa. Did you know that it was years before the great German Reformer Martin Luther was able to address God as “Father” because of the abuse he experienced from his own father while a child? But over time Martin Luther was able to separate out his experience of his earthly father from his heavenly father. As we mature, we all are called to sort these things out for ourselves.

On this Father’s Day we can thank our fathers for all the good they have done and for the life they gave us; we can show some compassion by understanding that our fathers did the very best they could under the circumstances they found themselves in; and we can forgive them for any wrongs. Most importantly we can come to understand the difference between our first love and our second love. And this understanding of the difference between our first love and our second love is one of the greatest Christian teachings that we should pass on to our children and friends. And the teaching is quite simple. Our first love is from God, who loved us before we were born. The second love is from our parents, brothers, sisters, spouses, children, co-workers, neighbors, friends, etc. This second love, which can never fully satisfy us, is only a very flawed reflection of that first love. And even if this second love is removed from us in this life, the first love remains, no matter what.

One of the great gifts of our Christian tradition is that it proclaims that whether we are born from the loving union of two people doesn’t matter. Whether our birth was planned doesn’t matter. Whether our birth parents welcomed us into the world with happiness doesn’t matter. Whether we are treated with respect and kindness by our earthly parents or those around us doesn’t say anything about who we really are in the big picture of things. Because in the big picture of things we have a “father who art in heaven” who loves us with a heart that is overflowing.

And our father who art in heaven has planned for each and every birth with love and great expectation. As it says so beautifully in Psalm 139:13-16:

***For it was you [God] who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.***

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

***Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.***

***15 My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.***

***16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.***

From all eternity, God chose us, called us, knew us, and loved us. God loves each of us as though there were no one else in the world, as though there were only one person to love. We are so precious to God, as Jesus reminds us in the book of Matthew, that **“even the hairs on your head will all be counted”** (Matt 10:30). This is not only a word spoken to Jesus’ disciples back then over 2,000 years ago but is God’s word to each of us sitting here today. Each of us is a totally unique creation and precious to God, to our father who art in heaven. Each of us is wanted, loved, cherished!

Yet so many of us go through life searching for the love of our father. Robert Lewis heard the story of man who wanted to hear his father say, “I love you.” But his father had died in World War II, when this man was only three years old. His mother had often assured him of his father’s love as he was growing up, but it didn’t help fill the void he felt. One day, this man, now 40 years old, was helping his mother move. She gave him an old Army picture of his father. The picture suddenly slipped out of his hands and the frame and glass shattered all over the floor. As he picked up the mess, the man noticed a piece of paper wedged behind the photo. It was a letter from his father. He had known that he might die in the war, so he had written a letter to his three-year-old son and hidden it behind the picture. In the letter, the father shared all his love for his son. So at the age of 40, this man finally found what he had spent his life searching for: his father’s love.⁴

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Galatia and to all of us. In this letter he shared the love that our heavenly father has for all of us. Its wisdom transcends all time and space and it is addressed directly to you. Your name is on this letter.

⁴ Robert Lewis, *Raising a Modern-Day Knight* (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1997), 35-36.

And it reads: *For in Christ Jesus you are ALL children of God through faith. ... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:26-29, NRSV)

Who are you? This letter proclaims that you are a child of God. Remember that none of us is unwanted. None of us is an orphan. We all have a father who art in heaven. We are ALL children of a living God, who loves us without limits and reservations, no matter who we are. And, as an added bonus, in Christ we are all ***“Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise”***, members of the same royal family! So look in the mirror, straighten out your crown, and claim your royal heritage as you go out into this brand new week, rejoicing and giving thanks both for your earthly and for your heavenly Father.

Closing Prayer: Our Father who art in heaven, we thank you that no matter what messages we may have received from our families or the world around us you have given us the great honor of being your children. We are loved, wanted, cherished! We thank you for being our Father. In the name of your son Jesus, who was disappointed by second loves and rejected by the world, we lift up this prayer. Amen.