

AS A SON WITH HIS FATHER
Father's Day

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2 Tim. 1:3-14

Phil. 2:22 *But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.*

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, "60 Minutes" ran a segment that tells us something important about the role of fathers. Park Managers at a South African wildlife preserve were concerned about the slaughter of 39 rare white rhinos in the park. They found out these rhinos were killed by juvenile delinquents— not people, but teenaged elephants.

The story began a decade earlier when the park could no longer sustain the increasing population of elephants. They decided to kill many of the adult elephants whose young were old enough to survive without them. So, these young elephants grew up without fathers. As they grew into teens, they began to roam together in gangs, doing things elephants normally wouldn't do. They threw sticks and water at rhinos and acted like neighborhood bullies. A few of these young males grew especially violent, knocking down rhinos, stepping on them or kneeling on them, crushing the life out of them. The rangers had to begin killing some of the more violent teens.

Then, someone theorized that the young teen-aged elephants were acting badly because they lacked role models. They brought in some large bull elephants to see if they could bring the adolescents under control. And it worked. The big bulls soon established their dominance and whipped the youngsters into shape, teaching them proper elephant conduct. And the assaults on the white rhinos ended.

Father's Day is a good time for us to reflect upon the important role of fathers in family life. We live in a time when, unfortunately, the majority of our children do not grow up in a home with both their birth mothers and fathers. Not only do we have single parent families but with same-sex marriage, the idea of both a mother and a father in a family is being questioned. Aren't two moms or two dads just as good? Of course, as believers, we know the answer is "no." God created families with a mom and dad for good reasons and we tinker with that arrangement to our peril.

But for those for whom the Bible isn't sufficient authority, new scientific studies are highlighting the importance of fathers. In a study put out by the Yale School of Medicine in 2004, it concluded:

"Fathers bring a different parenting style to everyday activities... Dads often take an active approach that encourages children to solve problems on their own rather than asking for help." This approach is needed to help balance the family, since mothers, on the whole, tend to be more nurturing than challenging. "Kids need both parenting styles,

but the father's contribution can be crucial: it helps kids develop a can-do attitude and helps hone their problem-solving skills.... Fathers often adopt parenting methods to help prepare kids for the real world."

Of course, when we think about it, all that is fairly obvious. There is a reason men don't stop to ask for directions— it is that independence, that "I'll solve it myself" attitude. And it does have a place in balanced parenting.

To fathers here this morning (and much applies as well to grandfathers), I want to challenge you to take-up your God-ordained role in parenting. I'm afraid many fathers abdicate their role in parenting. It may be priorities that are skewed or sometimes I think they just don't appreciate the importance of what they can offer. Our society has tended to minimize the role of a father in raising children.

Now, I want to assure you up front that my goal is not to heap guilt upon those who have a failed marriage, who are single mothers, widows, or have a husband or ex-husband who refuses to be an engaged father. God's grace is sufficient to bring single-parent homes what is needed to raise emotionally healthy kids. But I also think, the brokenness of families in our time offers a special challenge to Christians and the church. God may be calling some of us to be part of an extended family to families where gaps have occurred.

The Apostle Paul's relationship with Timothy is instructive in this regard.

"TIMOTHY MY DEAR SON"

We first learn about Timothy in Acts 16:1-3. It is Paul's second visit to Lystra, and Timothy is listed as a disciple, noting his mother was a Jewish convert to Christianity, but his father was a Greek and apparently a non-believer. It is speculated that Timothy was converted under Paul's preaching on his first missionary journey to Lystra. Now, he takes Timothy along with him in a mentoring relationship that continues for the rest of Paul's life. He refers to Timothy as "my son," "my true son in the faith," "my dear son," and as "my son whom I love." (1 Tim. 1:18; 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; 1 Cor. 4:17). And, in Phil 2:22, he writes,

But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel.

I don't think it takes much of a jump to see Paul as fulfilling a father-like role for Timothy. Timothy had godly women in his life— his mother and grandmother. But he needed a godly father to realize his full potential. Let's look at 2 Tim. 1:3-14.

This is a father-son kind of talk. "Don't be timid... get out there and use your gifts... don't be ashamed... don't be intimidated... be tough... don't worry about a little suffering... you have the power of God!" There is an unmistakable pushing here, strong encouragement, and an "I believe in you" thrust. That is what fathers are best at. They are there to challenge and create toughness and resilience in their children.

A study reported in "USA Today" in 2002, reported that children with involved fathers were:

- more confident and less anxious in unfamiliar settings;
- better able to deal with frustration;

- better able to gain a sense of independence;
- more likely to become compassionate adults;
- more likely to have higher self-esteem;
- more likely to have higher grade-point averages;
- more sociable.

You can sense most of those elements in Paul's admonitions to Timothy, can't you? (Well, maybe not the grade-point). Timothy has spent years with Paul on missionary journeys, learning from the master. And Paul places huge confidence in Timothy. He sends him to Ephesus to handle some church problems there and care for the church while Paul is in prison. And the two letters we have in the New Testament addressed to Timothy are some instructions Paul sends to his right-hand man. In 2 Timothy, in what is perhaps Paul's final writing before his death, he is asking for Timothy to come to him. He needs a cloak to keep warm and he needs the companionship of his "true son in the faith" since many others have turned on him and abandoned him.

FILLING GAPS

Paul is modeling something important for the church. There are families around us who need our help. You can be part of providing a father-like figure or a mother-like figure where there is a need. I've seen that happen in inspiring ways. Or if you are blessed with a healthy, intact family, let it also be an outreach to some children who don't know about that— inviting them into the healthy interaction of your family life as appropriate. Grandparents can often fill some of these places as role models, in mentoring, and in providing the right kind of influence where needed.

I want us to think beyond father-models to include mother-models as well. The church should be a place where we look to help each other in those ways. It doesn't have to involve huge commitments of time, just involving a kid in something you enjoy doing— a sport, a hike, a learning opportunity, working on a car, building something, baking, or any number of other things. Certainly, any single parent can use some support and help— perhaps even just an hour or two a week for a little break.

When we baptize children in a Presbyterian church, there is a wonderful promise we make as a church. In the baptism of a child, promises are made between the parents and God, witnessed and prayed for by the church family. But another promise is made between the church and them. Let me read it to you.

“Do you, the people of the church, promise to tell this child the good news of the gospel, to help him [her] know all that Christ commands, and, by your fellowship, to strengthen his [her] ties with the household of God?”

So, there's a sense in which we, the church, become an extended family to them. Ordinarily, in a Presbyterian church, we do not have godparents in an infant baptism since that is a role the whole church takes on through this promise. We pledge our support. Certainly we help provide that in our Sunday School and youth groups. But, often, it needs to take on a practical, personal, hands-on dimension when there are other needs that arise. What if we all took that promise with

utmost sincerity for every child under the care of this church?

The Rev. Doug Kelly, now our Synod executive, shared a personal story with a former church where I was a pastor in Montana. Doug grew up in the Presbyterian Church in Duluth, MN. His parents had him baptized, but it sounds like he was pretty much left on his own in getting to Sunday School and church. There was never any money for Doug to go to church camp. But every year, he was informed his way had been paid— so he never missed a year. He never knew how that happened. Then, when he was in college or seminary, he was doing some work for the church. One job he was given was take some accumulated boxes of old canceled checks and financial records and burn them in the church's furnace. As he began tossing them in he caught sight of his name on one of them. So, he looked further. There he saw noted a check from a man in the church with the notation, "for Doug to go to camp." He thought about his yearly church camps and began looking at that period of time for those years. Each year, he saw this name there paying for his camp. Doug was surprised, since he never had any close relationship with this man— he was just "one of the men in the church" to Doug. Curious, Doug approached him, confessing his peeking at the ledgers, and thanked him for all those church camps. Then Doug asked, "Why did you do it?" This man replied, "Doug, the day you were baptized, I was there. I made a promise to you. And in addition to my prayers for you, this is another way I kept that promise."

CONCLUSION

Finally, I want to offer a word of hope and grace to those of you who maybe feel like you failed as a father. Or perhaps you did your best and your best doesn't seem good enough since you are disappointed in the choices your children are making, and they are not serving the Lord. And some may realized their priorities were messed up and they substituted material blessing for hands-on love and time with their kids. Remember, God's grace is there— and whenever we realize our mistakes and call out to the Lord, He is able to intervene and work in powerful, redemptive ways in our children's lives. No mistake is too big for God to handle. Prayer for our kids is powerful. But know that you may not see the full effect. I see people coming to Christ later in life, sometimes after their parents are gone— but nonetheless, it is a harvest of parental intercession. So don't make the mistake of evaluating things too soon. Wait until the full picture can be seen.

And, for all of us. We need to be prayerfully open to any promptings the Lord may give us to be involved in helping families. I don't need to remind you that this is one of the great battlegrounds of our day. When healthy families are destroyed, society suffers. Is there something you can do in helping raise children with strong character and who know the Lord? Vacation Bible School is coming up in a few weeks. VBS has proved to be one of our church's best outreaches for kids in the community, and a tool for growing our Sunday School. Are there unchurched children you know or who are in your neighborhood that you could invite? The Blue Angel bus can even provide the transportation. Offer yourself to the Lord in prayer to be used as He directs.