

## YOU REALLY NEED TO BE THERE!

Rev. Bruce J. Roffey

New Hope and York Pines United Church

York United Ministries

Sunday, June 19, 2022

Do you remember when you were young and just as you were going out the front door Mom would call out, "Where you are going?"

"Nowhere," you'd say.

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing," you'd reply.

When you got home Dad would ask, "How was your day? What did you do?"

"Oh, nothing," you'd say. "Nothing."

Actually, it wasn't nothing at all. You did everything. If you were a boy you played ball, and rode your bikes, and waded in the creek, and told jokes, and laughed, and...you did everything and you were everywhere and you can't describe it. "Dad," you might say, "You had to be there."

Now there were also days when you really did do nothing. Those were the lazy days when you simply lay on the ground and pondered the passing clouds your imagination taking you to far off lands. You dreamed dreams and saw visions. And you'd swear you could feel the grass growing under your back. Then you'd turn over and watch the ants carrying boulders and building a new world.

These are what the Buddhists call days of mindfulness when there is full awareness of the present moment. These are days of growth and when we pass through them we are never the same.<sup>1</sup>

And to try to tell your parents about that, well, you really had to be there.

When you go home today, if someone asks you what your day was like, what will you say? I'm sure you won't say that you went nowhere and did nothing. You went to church, perhaps for the first time in a long time, and you did a lot while you were there. You sang and listened to music. You prayed and listened to prayers. You were silent listening to words spoken by someone else and words spoken by God directly to your heart. You did a lot today and you might be tempted to say you did nothing simply because "You had to be there." You have to experience it to understand. Talking about it just doesn't do justice to the moment.

Some Sundays other things happen. We break bread and pour wine, and what seems like nothing, so simple becomes a sacrament in which we share communion in the body and blood of Christ.

Other Sundays, water is poured, and the sign of the cross is made on the foreheads of children. We smile as the children are carried into the congregation as a sign of initiation into the family of Christ. Sometimes we applaud. It seems so simple, like nothing, but the action becomes a sacrament.

But something else happens at baptism. Have you ever noticed it? It isn't at all obvious. Indeed, sometimes I think that the things we do get in the way. Seeds are planted. Seeds, our children, are planted in the soil of God's love to be watered by God's Spirit. And we as congregation and parents make a covenant with God to be their gardeners, to tend to these children, to nurture them, to encourage them, to teach them, to be examples for them spiritually, not just in the usual ways that parents do, but in the special and particular way of faith. And we entrust them to God, for after all is said and done what happens, how they will grow spiritually and become part of God's people working for the coming of God's reign, is up to God.

Jesus told the people a parable, which for today I would like to tell like this, "The kingdom of God is as if parents should scatter the seeds of their children upon holy ground, and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and

grow, they know not how. Growth happens without recognizable cause, worked by God<sup>2</sup>, first the child, then the youth, then the adult. And then it is harvest.”<sup>3</sup>

Isn't that what it's like to be a parent? Most of us have older children now. Time flies so quickly. Children grow so fast that before we know it they are gone. And how it happened remains somewhat of a mystery. Seemingly, despite our multitude of mistakes, they grow and mature and we are proud as if we had something to do with it.

We did. We were God's partners. What happened was not only our doing, or even mainly our doing, but we had a part. Our work, our shared lives with our children, was our ministry, is our ministry, as parents, as mothers and fathers, as moms and dads, as people of the church.

I once heard a brief snippet of an interview on radio with an author who had toured Canada looking for the birthplaces, the homes, of Canada's great authors and artists where they were brought up. And you know, those places were ordinary. Out of ordinary places came extraordinary people. These homes, he said, were like the farmhouses your great aunt and uncle had that you visited as a child. Or places some of you have now for your grandchildren to visit. Ordinary places but special in some unobvious way.

All our homes are ordinary, but with God within them and with us parents as God's gardeners, they can be extraordinary, places where children are encouraged and nurtured, places where they can grow in wisdom and understanding, in faith and in reverence for God.

On this Father's Day, I remember my father. Although he died just over 52 years ago, I still remember him fondly. I have received many gifts from him, but the greatest of these was the example of his faith. My father could not, of course, give me faith. Nor could my mother. Each child must develop our own faith. It comes as a gift from God. But my father gave me the example of his own. By his practice, he taught me the importance of prayer and devotions with Scripture before he left

for work, the importance of regular attendance as a whole family at worship, the importance of stewardship, the importance of being part of the church's leadership, the importance of service to others, the importance of compassionate visiting as an Elder. Those actions within our home taught me more than any words could do, and they led me to seek my own way and eventually to come to my own faith and commitment.

For a man, being a father, being there for your children is tremendously important. It is a ministry.

Years ago, when Deanna was young I attended a conference at York University on the topic "Fatherhood in crisis: defining dad's role for the new millennium."<sup>4</sup> The statistics were startling. The time fathers are spending with their children is diminishing all the time. Seventy-five percent of American fathers spend less than one hour a day with their children. I don't suppose in Canada it's any different.

As a father of a daughter, I was startled to learn that the most important indicator of divorce and early pregnancy for girls is not race, not income level, but the lack of fatherhood. Girls who never felt the love and acceptance of their fathers seek that love and acceptance from others in unacceptable ways. A girl who feels loved by her father develops a sense that she is worth being loved.

With boys, a well-fathered boy learns by watching his dad that you can be a strong man and still care for others. Male energy and aggression need not result in violence and combativeness but can be harnessed for good intentions.

A strong relationship with a father, added to the caring relationship with a mother, leads to the development of compassionate young men and confident young women. The message is quite clear, Dads, we need to be there for our children, to really be there.

Personally, I find that being a father, being a husband, just being a man, in this changing world is not easy.<sup>5</sup> When I say that I know many men, and probably women, haven't got a clue why I

would say that and they don't agree. But I also know that for many men that rings true. Being a father is not easy. Certainly, it is fun and joyous and meaningful and uplifting and encouraging and fulfilling and nurturing, but it is not easy. Nonetheless, on this Father's Day as I remember my own father, I want to rededicate myself to being the best father, husband and man I can be. I want to nurture those seeds confident that by the grace of God growth will come. Won't you do the same?

In the comic strip about the house husband Adam, two of his children are seen in a store. They approach the salesperson about a Father's Day card which they want to say, "To the World's Greatest Dad."

"You're in luck," she says, "We must have hundreds against that wall over there."

"Now I'm really confused," the little boy says standing before a wall of cards. "If our Dad is the world's greatest dad, who are all these other cards for?"

It is my hope that all those cards will be given out today to the world's greatest dads, and that when our children reach adulthood and are embarking on their own way they might say to us, "My life has been great, and Dad, thanks for really being there."

---

<sup>1</sup> William Alexander, *A Father's Book of the Spirit*, Avon Books, 1997, Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> The single Greek word which is translated in the Revised Standard Version as "of itself" could also be translated "without recognizable cause" or "worked by God". See Mitzi Minor, *The Spirituality of Mark*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Paraphrase of Mark 4: 26-29.

<sup>4</sup> Reported in "Why dad's absence rings alarm bells", Louise Brown, *The Toronto Star*, Tuesday, (June 10, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, "Where have all the churchmen gone?", John Bird, *The Observer* (May 1997), pp. 27-33.