

## **Fathers' Day 2013**

Remarks by Rev. Steven Epperson

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Every year Fathers' Day comes around, and I feel like I'm in a kind of a bind—do you know what I mean? Each year, approaching this Sunday, without fail, I start thinking about father figures like Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* on the one hand—a dignified, kind, and worthy man who represents an ideal for the community and his children, and on the other hand, there was the reality I (and maybe a lot of us) grew up with—a father who was no Atticus Finch by any stretch of the imagination. And to ratchet up the conundrum even more, at a popular cultural level—in films, TV, advertisements, and so on, figures like Atticus Finch have pretty much disappeared and have been replaced instead by Homer Simpson, and myriad Homer-like dads—men who are even more childish than their own children, or worse—boorish, sexist, emotionally narrow, weak, deadbeats, distant or abusive. That's the trope right now.

And I don't want to whine; patriarchy has been and is real, dreadfully real in theory and practice with untold miserable consequences; baleful consequences for women, children and men, in marriages, relationships and families, in politics, religion, culture and economic relations in countless ways. Someone like an Atticus Finch seems like an unattainable ideal, unreal even; and for some time it's been incredibly difficult to acknowledge or put forward such a person without sanctimony or the suspicion of some throwback, return to a golden age-that-never-was agenda. *I get it; I think.* But if I'm the one talking about this, can what I say be trustworthy? After all, I *am* a father, (and white and middle class, etc. etc.) and could be blind to my own privilege.

That said, I am also one man's son; and I have also seen the effects of parenting good and bad on many other a father's children—young and grown to adulthood—and seen and experienced the rippling effects through families and generations of decent, kind and wise men who try their level best to be fathers—I have also seen more than enough of the opposite.

My lawyer son once told me that there's nothing more beautiful than a good cop; the same can be said, I think, about a good dad. And it's a shame if we think this is all just so much wishful thinking or regressive social psychology. The British author and journalist Tim Lott put it like this: "without a good role model, adults react much the same as children—*they live down to expectations*. They will not make the effort if they know their efforts are doomed before they even start ... And this is especially hard," Lott continues, "for boys growing up today," hard "to think well of themselves and their future" when there's this "default cultural position holding that they are always on the brink of backsliding into sexism, violence or simple incompetence. Boys need role models and girls need fathers they can respect as well as lovingly mock." (Tim Lott, "Our culture treats men and boys as second-class citizens," *Guardian*, June 14, 2013)

Most of you know by now that this issue has become particularly important to me in the past year a half—I have two grandchildren; and I've had the sweet experience of visiting my sons, daughters-in-law and Jane and Eli. I am one of those ridiculously proud granddads for whom pushing a grandchild around in a buggy in a New York City neighbourhood, or having my granddaughter Jane overcome her initial wariness and hold my hand and walk down the sidewalk is just about the best, most ecstatic feeling I can have. It just doesn't get much better than that in my book. It's also been funny and touching to see my sons making a go of it, being dads.

As well, you know by now that I can be pretty serious, intense to a fault about a lot of things. So it should come as no surprise that I was particularly moved when I saw the photo that

we reprinted on the cover of the order of service—a picture of Steven Cobb carrying his daughter Jordan away from her elementary school in Oklahoma that had just been leveled by a tornado. That photograph put me in mind of the recent novel *The Road*, written by Cormac McCarthy. I don't know if you've read the book; it is intense, so be careful, but *The Road* is one of the most powerful books I've read about how a father can love his child; how much he can love and to what lengths he will go to both protect the child and pass on by word and example whatever glimmer of goodness, decency and hope can be rescued in the book's postapocalyptic landscape that has reduced most everyone else to a desperate, violent struggle to survive. Let me read just one passage:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circle of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground foxes in their cover. Borrowed time in a borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it... Then he returned, banked the fire against the seam of rock where he built it and he strung the tarp behind them to reflect the heat and they sat warm in their refuge while he told the boy stories. Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them until the boy was asleep in his blankets and then he stoked the fire and lay down ... in that threadbare wood ... all through the long dusk into the dark. Cold and starless. Blessed. He began to believe they had a chance.

In the midst of all that darkness and almost beyond hope—there's that word, in spite of all—"blessed," blessed because of the love one man feels and strives desperately to embody because of his child, a child he sees as a being of light.

There's a book-length poem written by Ruth Padel celebrating the recent 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin where I think she was right in focusing on Darwin as a father and husband. Those roles were central to his character and sensibility. They brought him enormous pleasure and barely imaginable pain—Darwin himself was chronically sick; he suffered greatly due to a number of illnesses, and he also lost three adored children and watched

them die in unalleviated suffering. As well, as a naturalist and author of the theory of natural selection, he was acutely aware of the vast, violent, implacable wastage of life in nature down through eons of time. And yet, through all this, he wrote that “according to my judgment happiness decidedly prevails, though this would be very difficult to prove.” He put it this way: “If all members of a species habitually suffered to an extreme degree, they would neglect to propagate their kind.... All sentient beings seem to have been formed so as to enjoy, as a general rule, happiness.” (from Ruth Padel, *Darwin: A Life in Poems*, 2009, xv, xvi)

What unites the nameless father in McCarthy’s *The Road*, and Padel’s *Darwin*—is not only clear eyed realism *and* a deep faith in our will to happiness, in spite of everything—but also their decision to add whatever measure of good they can to the sum of life so that it will endure and thrive in love. In spite of acute loss, and his letters clearly, painfully show it, Darwin was remembered by his surviving children like this: ‘Whatever my father did with us ... had over it a glamour of delight.’ He sets the girls to search/for wormcasts. ‘Damp evenings are best [he said]./ Horace finds him snake and lizard eggs, Frank plays bassoon/ to worms (are they really deaf [father wonders]) and even flowers/to see how they like vibration. He strings all seven children over/long grass and scabious in a chain, to paint/and track the bumblebees who pollinate red clover.’ (Padel, 114)

I love that image of Darwin’s children sent out by their father to run after bumblebees in order to track and map out that hidden knowledge, the busy flight paths from hive to clover and back again. ‘Whatever my father did with us ... had over it a glamour of delight.’

Well these have been my thoughts on this Fathers’ Day; on the serious side, but then again that’s me. But I want to end these remarks with one grandfather’s report from the field of

contemporary fathering, at least as I've seen it in two places the past couple of months and in a different key altogether: Louis CK and *Splat the Cat*.