

The First Baptist Church, Midland
June 20, 2010 – Father’s Day
Matthew 21: 12-17

It Takes Courage To Be a Dad!
A Father’s Day Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

Recently I read a delightful little book entitled, Carry On! Help and Hope for Life’s Everyday Battles, by David Skates. In it he shares a story about a United States Senator named Edmund Ross.

You may not immediately recognize that name because you have to go back to the middle of the 19th century to hear his story. In fact, the exact year was 1867. Andrew Johnson (Abraham Lincoln’s successor) was President at the time and he had been battling the radical Republican leadership in Congress. While Johnson was trying to follow Lincoln’s policies of reconciliation between the north and south, the radicals wanted to punish the south and treat it as a conquered province. And they considered Johnson to be their number one target to defeat in order to get their way.

Hence, there was a movement to impeach the President. The House of Representatives brought the charges and the Senate held the trial. Thirty-six votes, which was two-thirds of the Senate at that time, were needed for conviction and Johnson’s opponents were willing to do anything necessary to get their votes. Bribery was rampant as were threats upon one’s safety. Of the forty-two Republican senators, six thought him innocent while thirty-five were ready to find him guilty. Only one senator, Edmund Ross, wouldn’t say how he would vote.

Ross who was from Kansas suddenly found himself at the center of this melodrama. He had built his political career on a strong antislavery stand but he personally disliked Johnson. Hence the radicals took it for granted that he was one of them. However, when he refused to reveal his vote because he believed Johnson deserved a fair trial he suddenly found himself being threatened with ostracism and even assassination! It didn’t sway the Congressman from Kansas.

Finally after the trial was completed the vote took place on May 16, 1867. With thirty-six votes needed for impeachment the Republicans had thirty-five in hand. Skates describes the scene like this. “The room was deathly silent. Every eye stared at the freshman senator from Kansas. Sensing the mix of hopes and hatred, Ross was afraid. His throat was so dry that when he gave his answer, no one could hear him! Asked to repeat it, he spoke up loudly and unmistakably: ‘Not guilty!’

“With those two words, Ross threw away friendships, position, and fortune. His political career was over. Neither Ross nor the other six Republican senators who voted “not guilty” were ever re-elected to the Senate.” (David A. Skates. Carry On: Help and Hope For Life’s Everyday Battles. Standard Publishing Company: Cincinnati, OH, 1996. Pgs. 9-11)

What courage! To be able to stand strong for what you believe to be right in the face of overwhelming and threatening opposition takes unwavering nerve and daring audacity. It means

a person is willing to risk things of value in order to maintain integrity. And I want to suggest on this Father's Day that it takes this kind of courage to be a dad. Let's think about that.

There's an amazing story in the New Testament that lends some insight to what I'm saying. You're probably familiar with it because it is one of the few stories found in each of the gospels. In Matthew it is referred to as *Jesus Cleansing the Temple*.

Of course, we read it just a few minutes ago. And I imagine when you heard it your mind went right to the traditional understanding the Christian community embraces when considering this experience. This is one of the few glimpses we have into an angry Jesus. His house of prayer has been turned into a den of robbers, he says, and in the angst of the moment he proceeds to upend the tables of the moneychangers. This is certainly one legitimate way of looking at this story, and it is the way that I, quite frankly, have viewed it through the years. But in wrestling with it this week, I've come to see it in a different light. For this can also be interpreted as a glimpse at *a courageous Jesus*. Let's think about that and in the process consider how this might say something to the parenting task in our day, because some of the lessons drawn from the experience of Jesus can certainly be applied to the challenge of being a dad.

The first lesson I draw from this encounter has to do maintaining one's values. When Jesus entered that temple and took note of what was happening he was immediately confronted with a dilemma. The culture of his day said one thing but in his heart he knew another.

As a faithful Jew, it was fully accepted to move into the porticos of the temples to purchase an animal for sacrifice. If you didn't have a whole lot of money, you bought the dove but if you were well healed, you might have up-scaled your purchase. More to the point, this was an acceptable and predictable way to fill the coffers of the synagogue. The only problem is, it wasn't fair to the people being served for Jesus knew the value of repentance was born out of what rested in a person's heart and it had nothing to do with the amount of money a person could afford to pay in order to make a sacrifice leading to their cleansing. In fact, it's ironic that he would end up sacrificing his own life in order to do away with the sacrificial system.

Dads... and moms, too... we need to know that in our day we are constantly faced with the same challenges. There are social norms that have been affirmed by our culture that are far removed from the values we may embrace as a family and sometimes it's difficult to take a stand... dating rules, alcohol consumption, dress codes, curfews, church attendance, etc. When our kids feel the pressure to embrace the community or peer standards around these kinds of issues that are in conflict with our personal family values, it's important that we speak out against the social norms and hold the line on what we believe to be right. That's what Jesus was doing in this story.

A second lesson has to do with discipline verses friendship. Jesus did not have to go into the portico and do what he did. It would have been much easier to walk by and to simply let things be. He could have embraced the leaders of the temple as his friends and ignored their behavior. But he didn't. He took action to bring discipline to the behavior of the religious leaders in his day in order to stand up for what he believed to be right.

This is one of the tough edges when it comes to parenting. It's much more comfortable to be "friends" with our kids and in the process to allow inappropriate behavior or actions to go unchallenged. But the pleasure that comes with friendship in the short run gives way to the possibility of a child running amuck in the long run. And the truth is that in the big picture our kids need structure. If they have no boundaries they will experience chaos. But if they have those boundaries, the gift will be security. Oh, they may not see that now and there certainly will be times of testing. But in the end, there will be a much deeper friendship that lasts a lifetime as they grow to appreciate the values you passed along.

Finally, there is one more lesson to be taken from this experience of Jesus and the den of robbers and it has to do with one's spiritual convictions. Jesus and his Father in Heaven were one. John places these words on the lips of Jesus repeatedly in his gospel. And his purpose in life was to bring God to life in ways people could better understand.

Dads and moms... as children of God ourselves, this is our call, too. As we create an environment where the stories of Jesus take room in our family life... as we are able to behave in Christ-like ways so that our children can experience the love of God... as we help our kids look at life and its challenges through the lens of faith we will pass along our spiritual convictions to our kids.

Solomon puts it so well in Proverbs when he says, "***train children in the right way and when old they will not stray...***" (Proverbs 22:6) This simple story unfolding the encounter between Jesus and the den of robbers lends credibility to this proverb, don't you think. And as Jesus says to those who challenge his authority and his actions, "***Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies, you have prepared praise for yourself!***"

It's our day to be sure, dads, but in addition to the honor we receive from our kids and loved ones, let's never forget that the name "dad" carries with it some pretty significant responsibility. It was Ernest Hemingway, I believe, who once defined courage a "grace under pressure." May we all be so blessed that we are able to find the strength to be graceful when the pressures mount and the challenges of parenting seem unrelenting.

To close, consider the experience of a guy named Phil LeMaster who pastored a large congregation in the south. With all kinds of challenges to be met in the life of that church, he found himself constantly on the run. His wife, he said, was very understand but their two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Mandi, wasn't quite as gracious. Listen to the way he describes it...

"Mandi loved for me to read to her after dinner each evening – a practice I continued in my new position, with one caveat: I would sit on the edge of my recliner with her seated by my side and read a quick story or two before rushing out for another night of harried activity.

"One evening Mandi said something that jolted me back to reality about my role as a father. I had sat down with her in my recliner – once again on the edge, ready to quickly read and run. While I was reading, Mandi interrupted me, patted the recliner seat, and said, 'Scoot back, Daddy, scoot back.'" She knew that on those rare occasions when I wasn't going back out that I would relax, sit back in my recliner, and leisurely read stories to her heart's content.

“Her words pierced my soul as I understood what she was really saying: ‘Please slow down, Daddy. Make time for me!’”

Little Mandi, I would suggest, speaks for all our children. *Scoot back, Daddy, scoot back!*

Amen and AMEN!