



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Jesus said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't often share this story in public, but I am the father of three children, only two of whom are still alive. Our first child had a fatal birth defect. She never lived to see the light of day. It happened when we were in seminary. The trip to Tracy's obstetrician for what we still call "evil ultrasound" and her follow-up appointments were the toughest challenges in the first years of our marriage. There have been many others since. We named our daughter Francis Anastasia. Francis because of St. Francis of Assisi, who bore the wounds of Jesus in his own body. Anastasia because it means resurrection.

I'm sharing this story because I understand how painful today can be. It can be complicated for all kinds of reasons. The summer after Francis died, I remember leaving in the middle of a church service at our home parish. It was Father's Day, and a bunch of little kids were singing songs about how they love their daddies. I couldn't take it. I broke down sobbing and went to the car. Thank God those wounds are healed, mostly. The grief is still there, but it is much less raw and intense. There have been so many other losses since.

This Father's Day is the second one since the death of my own father. I shared a bit about him last Lent. My dad was a complicated man, by no means perfect, but not a monster either. Like many fathers, he cast a long shadow, but in many other ways, he blessed his children. He was a good but imperfect man. His birthday was just last month. This year, I find myself missing him and wishing I could call him.

There is this story about my dad that nearly always brings me to tears. When I was just four or five, he wanted my mother to go out and watch me play in the yard. It was fenced, it was safe, but my dad was still worried about me. "Why?" my mom asked him. "Because the wind might blow him away," he said. My dad knew better, but he worried anyway. So much of what he wanted most was to protect his children. He wanted to do a better job of that than his own father had done, and even if sometimes he failed, I love my dad for wanting that. I love him for trying not to pass on the worst parts of his own father's legacy. I don't think I really understood my dad until I became a father myself. I want to protect and nurture my kids in every way I can, though I don't always feel up to the job.

What a barnburner of a gospel we have this morning, especially for Father's Day. In it, Jesus tells us that His claim on us always comes first. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me," He says, "is not worthy of me, and whoever does not take up the cross cannot be my disciple." For some, this could be a call for liberation from the demands of harsh and unforgiving fathers or from any other fallen power that tries to claim our ultimate allegiance. I think that's what Jesus is saying here. But it need not undermine what is true about the fifth commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land." The form that honoring our fathers takes depends upon the details of our relationship. It doesn't mean overlooking their real flaws or putting up with unacceptable behavior. It means honoring. Sometimes it's very hard to figure out what that might mean.

A lot of stories are told about the first Christian monks. They used the title "father" a lot to describe a senior monk. Beginning in the third century in Egypt and elsewhere, these men and women fled the cities and went out to live in the desert. They did so just as many of us began to accommodate ourselves to the surrounding empire. The first monks were trying to follow Jesus more faithfully without compromising so much with the world. Some lived in community, others were hermits, but even the most isolated among them needed support, and so they relied on their relationships, even though they spent hours alone in prayer.

These Christians withdrew from the world for the sake of a deeper engagement with its struggles. They fled to the desert because they longed for God and spiritual transformation. You don't have to go to the desert to find that. Some of us find it here. With all their hearts, though, these monks sought the living God. They wanted to live in the ways of Jesus. Often, a group of them would gather around an experienced elder known as Father or Mother, from whom they would seek advice about how to pray, how to work, how to resist temptation.

Often these stories begin with someone wandering out of the desert on the doorstep of an elder, seeking a word of encouragement. The elder responds with a brief, wise saying, sort of like a Christian version of Master Po in Kwai-Chang Caine. Sometimes the advice concerns a particular challenge that the man is facing. Other times, the elder provides an insight into the Christian life in general, or even the Gospel itself. We might find it surprising, given how they lived in extreme poverty and bodily discipline, but the elder's advice is often, perhaps maybe even almost always, remarkably compassionate and humane.

Through lived experience, these monks knew their limits. They discouraged others from stretching themselves too thin. One of these stories gets told about a monk named Basil. A man comes to him and says, "Father, give me a word of life." With love, Basil looks at him and replies, "Say, 'I am a child of God,' and then live accordingly." That's all he says. He doesn't try to shame or control the other man.

He doesn't try to impose his agenda. In brief and simple words, he tries to comfort his brother and let God set him free. This, beloved, is the one thing we need to know about ourselves. It's the only thing. We need to know that we are children of God, and then live accordingly.

Too often when we think about being God's children, we get stuck on how little and dependent we are. It's a good thing in part. It can be helpful since it reminds us of our constant need for grace. We can never get enough love and forgiveness, but this kind of narrow focus risks obscuring what's most important to a father, helping their children to grow. As adult children of God, we are called to take responsibility for the family business, to live as true partners who share the concerns of our elders. We are called to assume adult responsibility for the world we share.

Paul says something like that in the sixth chapter of Romans where he talks about dying to sin and living to God. He is confronting those who suggest that because we are forgiven, and it's true, we are forgiven, but there are those who suggest that we can presume upon God's kindness. How can we who died to sin, Paul asks, go on living in it? Just because God's grace is free doesn't mean it's cheap. As if Jesus died on a cross so we could keep on living the same old ways. To the contrary, the Christian life is all about being transformed by love. In Jesus, God breaks the power of death in our lives. He invites us to know how deeply we are loved and to be changed by how deeply we are loved, and so we no longer belong to ourselves alone or to any earthly father or master.

Body and soul, in life and in death, we belong to Jesus. We have been set free to live for Him and to live for other people, to serve them, to serve their bodies, to care for their souls. Like Jesus, we live in the world as children of God. That is what we are. We are called to love the people He loves, all the people God puts in our lives. That means everyone, every last one without exception, even and especially those we find it hardest to love. In God's name, we are called to share our gifts and blessings with them.

Today is Father's Day, and as we honor our fathers, our grandfathers, and other important elders, I would like to pause to acknowledge something some of us may be feeling. Remembering our fathers can be painful. Even the very best ones are complicated. Sometimes, like us, they aren't very reliable, and as a result, fatherhood is not always the best metaphor for the steadfast love of God. And yet, how desperately we need a word of life from a trusted elder. We need to be seen and loved for who we are. We need, whenever possible, to acknowledge what the elders in our lives have done to make us what we are. It makes a huge difference when we find a father or a mother or a friend in Christ to bless us as we are and help us to grow.

That's why we need fathers and grandfathers and teachers and coaches and others. They show us how to be generous and merciful. They show us how to be strong and loving and kind. That's what lies at the heart of Jesus' own experience with the one he called Abba Father. Imagine for a moment what it was like to be Jesus. Two thousand years ago, He lived in a small Middle Eastern village as a child of questionable parentage. If we listen, we can still hear the other kids snickering behind His back.

But from the beginning, Jesus knew good and righteous Joseph, His adoptive father, and He also knew the liberator God of the Exodus as His very own father, the one who sent Him into the world, the one to whom He was going. Jesus knew this God to be the one who sent Him on His mission of love to every last creature. Jesus was sent by His Father on a mission of love, and He spent His life in constant awareness of God's great love for all of us.

"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" He said. "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father." For Jesus, the living God is actively involved in every single moment of our lives. God is our creative source, our sustaining power, and our final goal. God is pure, abundant love, and we are God's children. So beloved, go and live accordingly.

Amen.