

Matthew 9:35-10:8

The history of Father's Day dates back nearly one-hundred years. President Woodrow Wilson liked the idea, but not until 1966 did President Lyndon Johnson sign a bill designating the third Sunday in June as a day to honor fathers. I wonder, however, if such a bill would have been signed in our day when "deadbeat dad's" is a common expression in many households; when scores of children grow up not even knowing their fathers; and when children from every part of our nation suffer at the hands of abusive fathers.

Wilson liked the idea of having a "father's day" because it encouraged children to honor their fathers, and it promoted a healthy relationship between fathers and their children. And so today is Father's Day, and not just for those families where fathers are loved and respected. Today is not "Respected Father's" Day—it's Father's Day. No matter whether a father is loved or hated, whether he is decent or a deadbeat, this day is set aside to honor all fathers. And that's good, because no father is perfect. Every human father is a failure in one way or another. No matter how highly he is honored by his children, every father knows in his heart (if he is willing to admit it) that he has much to repent of when it comes to being a father to his children. Even the most-honored father, whose children love the Lord and are wonderful law-abiding citizens, knows that his children turned out well not because of him, but in spite of him. It is by the grace of God, who works through the mouths and hands of human fathers, that any child at all becomes a decent, God-fearing adult.

I think that we fathers, along with all of us, can take comfort from today's Gospel text. We see Jesus sending out His disciples to be workers in His Kingdom. As workers they are to preach the good news, and they are to care for the sick and the needy using the gifts Jesus gave them. They were sent out two-by-two—six teams going from village to village knocking on doors.

The names of all twelve disciples are listed here for us, and as we look closely at these names, it becomes clear to us that anyone who was helped and became a believer did so, not because of these twelve men, but in spite of them. It was by the grace of God, working through these disciples, that anyone repented of his sin and believed in his Savior.

Peter is the first name on the list. Although he liked to see himself as a strong follower of Christ, we know how weak he truly was. He often spoke without thinking, and when push came to shove, he denied his Lord three times. James and John were two other disciples who were very close to Jesus, but even they were far from perfect. "Sons of Thunder," Jesus named them, for rather than showing mercy to those who were rejecting Christ, they wanted right then and there, God to destroy them. Philip had difficulty understanding who Jesus really was. In John 14 Jesus scolds him for this. Thomas doubted the truth of the resurrection. Simon had been a proud Pharisee. Matthew was a thieving tax collector. Andrew, Bartholomew, James, and Thaddaeus are not known for doing much, and Judas is known for betraying the Lord Jesus.

Which team; which two of these disciples would you have wanted knocking on your door? Which of these disciples would you have wanted to come and preach to you the good news of the Kingdom? The one who would later deny Christ? The one who would betray Him and then go out and hang himself? The one who had been a Pharisee? A tax collector?

The one who had trouble with his understanding of who Jesus was? Or the ones who preferred to show wrath instead of mercy?

But the Jews to whom these disciples were sent had no choice in the matter at all. They could not choose which team came to their door, just as we had no choice in selecting our human fathers. Some Jews opened their door and saw Peter standing there before them to preach to them the good news of the Kingdom. Others opened their door and there was Judas. Some opened their door to Thomas. Others to Matthew and Philip. But it wasn't the man who was the key element here—it was Christ who spoke through their message.

If a Jew had said, "Forget you, Philip; I'd rather have James," or "Leave me alone, Matthew; send Peter over and I'll listen," they would have been dishonoring not the disciple, but Jesus. Were some better speakers than others? Yes. Were some disciples more dedicated than others were? Certainly. But it was Christ who spoke through each of them no matter how eloquent, or persuasive, or committed they were. Those who came to faith did so not because they lucked out by having one of the best of the twelve knock on their door, but because through the man at the door, Jesus Himself was giving them the gift of repentance and faith.

And that is true also of us and our fathers. Are there children who wish that a father of one of their friends was their dad? Yes. Are there adults who wish their father had raised them in a different way? Certainly, yes. But it's not all about the man; it's about the blessings God gave you, and gives you, through the man. Like those twelve disciples, every father has his weaknesses, his failures, his grievous sins. But like those twelve, it is God who is at work through human fathers; and it is God who is honored, therefore, when we honor our fathers.

Did you father, along with your mother, bring you to Jesus in Holy Baptism? Did he bring you to God's House on Sundays to grow in your faith? Did he teach you about the love of Christ? Did he show you God's compassion by forgiving you when you did wrong? What you saw was Jesus Himself at work in your father. You saw the love of God when he cared for you. You felt the hand of God when he disciplined you. You heard the voice of God when he prayed with you.

We honor St. Peter, St. James, St. John, and the other apostles not because of their human failings, but because of what God in His grace did through them in spite of their failings. And so we honor our fathers, for no matter how selfishly they have lived; no matter how many sins they have done; through them, God in His grace, has given us life; and also by His grace and mercy through His living Word has blessed us with His bounteous gifts in Christ Jesus.

God placed into the Scriptures stories of Peter's denials, of Thomas' doubting, of Judas' betrayal, and the others because He wanted us to see these disciples as the sinners they were—so that we could also see clearly God's compassion toward them. There is nothing better for a child to see than his own father with hands folded in prayer; his own father confessing with the congregation his unworthiness and sinfulness; and his own father humbly walking up to God's altar and receiving there forgiveness in the body and blood of Christ Jesus.

Was your father; is your father, a sinful man? Most certainly. But it's not about the man; it's about Jesus who died for your father, and who died for you. Before this day was ever Father's Day, it was set aside to be the Lord's Day. This is the day of grace for you. For you fathers who know in your heart that you have failed daily in your parental duties, this day of grace is for you. Jesus forgives you. For you children who fail to honor your father and mother as God commands, this day of grace is for you. Jesus forgives you. For all of you, whether your father is living or has died; whether your father was decent and God-fearing, or whether he was more of a deadbeat—for all those times you regret when you spoke against your father, when you angered him, when you grieved his heart—this day of grace is for you. Your sins are washed away. Jesus died for you. You are forgiven.

And there is another father here, today, who asks for your forgiveness. Your pastor is, in a spiritual sense, your father—just as he is your undershepherd. And this father is very much aware of his failings toward you; of his sins against God; of his weaknesses as a pastor. When he turns to the altar to confess his sins, he is not simply doing this to lead the congregation with his words, but he is, with you, asking God to forgive him. And when he takes the body and blood of Christ at the altar, he is not doing this simply to show you what to do, but because he desires in the Sacrament, the very same forgiveness given also for you.

What comfort I, as your spiritual father in the Lord, take from our Gospel text. For if God could work through those twelve disciples as sinful and weak as they were, then He can also work through me to bring to you God's grace and mercy in Christ Jesus. After all, it's not about the man—it's about Jesus who is compassionate toward you; who gives you today in Word and Sacrament what you need—His pure grace and forgiveness. Whether you're a father, a mother, a son, or a daughter, this day is a day of grace for you. It may be Father's Day, but even better, it's the Lord's Day for you. Amen.