

Pentecost 4, Proper 6
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Good Fathering

Happy Father's Day to all of you who father, by your own definition. Fathering is a complicated subject these days. For some, it elicits images of strength used in the service of others. For others it is so encrusted with Patriarchy's abuses that it is almost distasteful. For some, it brings back pleasant memories, for others very painful ones. It is no wonder that our use of the word to refer to God has been problematic. We reserve it for set texts like the Creed, whose statement of common faith is as symbolic as it is substantial.

But I am a father, and proud to be one. I know that many of you are also. I have to say, probably like many of you, that I grew into fathering. When I first cradled my firstborn in my arms, I was terrified I'd break him somehow. I wanted to stand brave and strong before the world and him and his mother, and that idea terrified me as well. Probably like all fathers, I know I wasn't a perfect father, and have learned wisdom born of pain. Maybe fathering is a kind of parable, a story we learn to live out that teaches wisdom and compassion, not to be taken lightly, but not to be over-thought, either; best held, cherished, approached with an open heart, open to unknown depths.

Jesus tells two parables in today's Gospel lesson that work that way. In the first one, a farmer goes out and plants seed. We know about planting here. We know about the patient work of the summer months as the miracles happen, first underground, and then above ground, and we know about harvest, the spud trucks filled to overflowing, leeks, broccoli, Brussel sprouts, berries of all kinds, begin to flood the produce stands. What every farmer knows is what the farmer really doesn't understand: How it is that the seed becomes food, just what that life-spark is that urges germination, growth and production. Science can tell us how, but not why. There is still a mystery that links a little to a lot; from whence we do not know.

The second is a little more localized to the Holy Land, where mustard in the garden was probably like here, as much of a weed as a cultivated plant, and one that, again, from a tiny seed produces a bush in which birds find a home. Again, there the mystery that links a little to a lot; from whence we do not know. If they teach us anything, it is that the Realm of God comes by God's design and action. We are involved, to be sure, but just as we do not truly understand the miracle of growth, even though we depend on it, so what God is doing in the world is in our hands and beyond them at the same time. Best to hold it with your hands and hearts open.

Our society today hates that! We want things tacked down. We want rules that make life predictable and easy for us (that is, for the ones that make the rules.) We want to get

what we paid for. We want to go where we decided to go. We want the house we've always dreamed of. We want to go to here or there or the other-where. We want movies where the bad guy loses and the good guy wins.

As fathers we want. We want our kids to do better than we did. We want them to make wise choices like we didn't. We want them to find good jobs and good partners and have great grandchildren. We don't want to support them for the rest of their lives.

We want, we want, we want...and there's the rub. In the space of mystery, "we want" doesn't work. The only thing we can say is, "we're here." On this Father's Day, it's time not to be the father, but to be the child of a good Father, a child content to wait with open heart and open hands, trusting that all will be well, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

At my previous parish there was an old church building across the street behind us. The Quakers gathered there every Sunday morning to sit. That's what they call it, to sit. They wait in expectant silence until someone is moved to speak. Sometimes no one speaks. One Sunday morning one of their number showed up at the 8:00 service. She told me she was raised Episcopalian, but found the expectation of mystery among the Quakers quite compelling. She was back, she said, because she realized mystery is built into our worship, too, and she wanted to come home. She continued to attend both services—a Quakerpalian.

Our worship does have it, if you wait for it, look for it, expect it. That mystery by which we always manage to be touched is the healing of the world's feverish "we want." Can you imagine what the world would be like if it caught on?

- One where openness to mystery is taught for rather than taught against?
- One where our borders were places of encounter rather than fear?
- One where mistakes don't get you fired or jailed or beaten up or killed, but rather teach us all to see what we can learn from it?
- One where who you are doesn't automatically make you invisible, undesirable or the target of injustice?
- One where the joy of Juneteenth is understood, appreciated and celebrated by blacks, whites, Hispanics, Indigenous folks, AAPI, everyone, because we know that anyone's liberation is tied up in our own?
- One where the expectation of mystery is a shared value, a common assumption and a beautiful thing?

In our mission statement we say that we believe God is healing and restoring the world. Not us, God, the source of the mystery of fathering. And we? We are recipients of, and participants in that healing and restoration. We hold the mystery with open hands and hearts. Robert Frost wrote a couplet called, "The Secret Sits."

*We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.¹*

¹ <https://allpoetry.com/The-Secret-Sits>