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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
June 15, 2014

Luke 2:41-52
"Fathers"

Since today is Father's Day, I begin this sermon with a focus on Jesus' father, Joseph.

The gospel story just read is the only Gospel account of Jesus as a boy. All other childhood stories are from the infancy narratives. Joseph appears in these stories only. He is totally out of the picture when we encounter Jesus as an adult.

Scholars say that Joseph died sometime after today's gospel story and before Jesus begins his ministry at age 30. They say if he had been alive when Jesus was crucified, he would have (under Jewish custom), been expected to take charge of Jesus' body, but Joseph of Arimathea instead performs this role. Nor would Jesus have entrusted his mother to John's care had her husband been alive.

Joseph was the son of a *tehton*, which in Greek was a carpenter or worker in iron or stone. The word technology comes from this Greek word. The Catholic Church designates Joseph as the patron saint of workers. There's a Catholic Church in Berkeley called, "St. Joseph the Worker Church."

There's another perspective of Joseph as carpenter. Jesus scholar, Geza Vermes, states that the terms 'carpenter' and 'son of a carpenter' is used in the Jewish Talmud to signify a very learned man, and he suggests that a description of Joseph as 'naggar' (a carpenter) could indicate that he was considered wise and highly literate in the Torah. This makes a lot of sense when one considers Jesus' considerable knowledge of the Torah and Jewish religion.

The biblical narratives depict Joseph as an honest and caring man. He takes Mary to be his wife in spite of her mysterious pregnancy. If he had not assumed this role, Mary could have been stoned for being pregnant out of wedlock.

Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt when Herod threatens the life of their newborn baby. He's a "take charge" and protective father. He's told in a dream to return to Israel when the coast is clear. His dreams and his interpretations of dreams portray Joseph as a person who takes seriously the voice of God in dreams, which affirms his spirituality.

In the story today, we find Jesus' parents looking for their 12-year-old son among the community of travelers after a day's journey from Jerusalem. They find that their child is not with them so they go back to the city to look for him and find him in the temple. Mary takes the lead in communicating to Jesus, which shows Joseph to be a quiet, background person in public. Many fathers assume this role in public.

Jesus' response is, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" This is the last time we hear of Joseph. The story seems transitional from a theological point of view because from this time on with Joseph out of the picture, Jesus makes repeated reference to God as Father.

The gospel story states that Jesus "went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor."

In summary, Joseph was a good father. Mary, as mother, had a more prominent role in the gospels and in the lives of her children. Joseph was gone but not forgotten. His death connects with many of us who have experienced the death of our fathers and therefore experienced grief as much as Jesus grieved the death of his father.

Both my fathers have passed on and both, I am sorry to say, were not positive role models. I never knew my biological father since he and my mother divorced when I was a baby due to his excessive drinking and disruptive behavior. My stepfather was around for five years, from my 5 to 10 years of age. He was a harsh disciplinarian and I found great relief when he ran off with another woman the second of his five marriages.

The father figures most caring and supportive for me were a Sunday school teacher, Fred Tiley, the father of a girlfriend, Ronnie Boyd, and an athlete who lived in our beachfront building who taught me to skip rope like a boxer and work out every day. The modelling in familial fathers was a wipeout but I am grateful for the fathers who came into my life in many other guises and I am grateful to be a father myself.

Gabriele Putzi told me last Sunday that neither of us was trained to be parents. We started from scratch and did our best. I didn't get a PhD in parenting. Good parents help us to be good parents and I did have a wonderful, caring and intelligent mother.

I asked three members of the church to share for a few minutes how their father influenced their faith and life.

Georgene Gmahling

Alan Edmonson

Diane Forster

There's an interesting article on fathers in Wikipedia. Among the fascinating facts is a list of 22 categories of father. Here are three to take home: Surprise father – where the men did not know that there was a child until possibly years afterward; DI Dad – social/legal father of children produced via Donor Insemination (where a donor's sperm were used to impregnate the DI Dad's spouse); and Stay-at-Home Dad – the male equivalent of a “housewife” with child, where his spouse is breadwinner.

God bless all fathers – and all mothers – and all men, women and children.
Amen.