

Father's Day Sermon, June 19, 2016
Kathy Randels

It is an honor to be asked to preach for you all today. This is my first official sermon in a Baptist church—even though I grew up in one. (and it is only fitting that the moment be father's day!) As most of you know, my father, Rev. James Richard Randels, was a pastor for most of his life. I spent my first 18 years listening to his sermons, which were really stories from his own life, and the world that he found to illustrate passages in the bible. I think some of you know that my mother, Eloise's father, Reverend Leonard Oren McCracken, was also a pastor. So it runs 2 generations deep.

My parents had five children and we each inherited different chips off of our old block: Susan is the nurse, the leader of a hospice center, the one who visits people and helps them when they are sick. Jim is the teacher, the one who uses stories to teach young people how to think, write, question injustice in their lives and our world. Bill is the commercial real estate salesman, the gregarious one, the one who dreams big about institutions and their spaces. Kay is the home real estate saleswoman; the one who helps people find their dream home; or sell the place they don't need anymore; the glamorous one, with connections all over the city. I am the showman, the shaman, the storyteller.

I've focused my inherited pastoral energy on the healing that comes from storytelling on multiple levels: the way a song can shift us cellularly and bring compassion into our hearts. The way a story, a play, like in Hamlet, can through humor or tragedy reveal "something rotten in the State of..." (fill in the blank).

As a theatre artist, I mostly write my own performances, collaboratively, but sometimes I interpret prewritten scripts. With plays, other people's texts, you have to look for the subtext. As a director, you are looking for all the character's subtext's to tell the whole story. As an actor you dive deeply into your one character's subtext, so you can play them honestly, realistically in each moment.

I've applied this practice to a look at David's Shepherd and Joseph today.

In Psalm 23 God is a shepherd. Was David 23 when he wrote it? Was he younger? Older? It's fun to imagine him writing it as a young man, with no idea of the King he would become.

It's also interesting to imagine him writing it as an old man in his final days, looking back at all of these experiences.

But today, I want the words to resound as an ideal of the qualities of a father. Father brings only wonderful connotations for some people. Father brings only negative connotations for some. We probably all know people who deeply love their fathers. And we probably all know people who deeply despise their fathers. And we probably all know people who never knew their fathers. I will speak from the middle today; and imagine that we have all deeply loved and deeply despised our fathers at some point in our lives. I will imagine that for those of us present who did not have a father regularly in our lives growing up, or now; there has been someone on your journey who you took to fulfill that role for you. And I would like to imagine that several of us have had both, biological fathers and fathers that we chose when we needed them.

David's Lord/Father is:

Mentor

Guide

The be all end all

The absolute authority

The one who says yes

The one who says no

Shepherd

I've never witnessed a live shepherd

But I imagine:

The shepherd is beautiful

The shepherd is peaceful

The shepherd gets bored sometimes

The shepherd is ready to pounce when wolves come, not afraid to use a weapon, and if he's a really good shepherd, he never has to use violence, the threat of violence is enough; and perhaps even beyond that; the certainty of what is right and wrong, keeps everyone: wolves, sheep, shepherd and townspeople in line

Would that it was so easy for fathers with their children.

My father was always right in my mind as a child. And even if he wasn't, it didn't matter, because the unwritten rule in our house was he was always right.

When any of the 5 of us did anything wrong, mother usually handled it—she was always home with us while he was out with his flock. But if any of us stepped too far out of bounds, she called on him to be that “ultimate authority.”

Now of course, we were raised in a Christian home, so there was always an understanding that there was an authority higher than dad. God. Jesus and The Holy Spirit (who I like to think of as female!). They all had more pull than him; but then we get into interpretation and who’s interpretation of God’s will for our family and our individual lives was right on any given day!

I remember the first time I questioned my father.

It was in a car on a long road trip.

He accused me of doing something I didn’t do. I have no memory now of what it is. What remains is the feeling of being falsely accused, and an early spark towards justice, which has led me do to many things including 20 years of working with incarcerated women. I was angry, hurt that in his mind, I was guilty until proven innocent. And it was in a small car, so I had to swallow it. I knew then that it wasn’t fair that parents were always right (that’s for you Emma if your listening!)

It’s true, parents aren’t always right. We mess up sometimes. We are human. We are your guides. We work you into our lives. You interrupt our lives. And we are grateful for the interruption. We embrace it, mostly. But sometimes the interruption shows.

On the outside.

Which leads us to Joseph’s interruption!

Joseph wasn’t sure about Mary. They were barely engaged when a bump started to show. What? Certainly a man at that time had dignity to protect, a life to look forward to, a problem to nip in the bud, swallow the loss and move on to a woman who would REALLY love him and ONLY him.

But Joseph, like his namesake in the old testament, believed that dreams were more than just life played out in strange ways at night; images of the life we want vs. the life we have. Joseph believed that dreams are a form of

communication with the divine. Joseph believed that when an angel, or god, or a sheep or even a piece of furniture, began to speak while he was dreaming: he should listen to those words and follow those visions.

Joseph was ready to roll out on Mary.

An angel said stay.

And he stayed, forever.

He is an archetype now in many people's dreams of many nations, many cultures.

The carpenter.

The earthly father of the son of God.

God asked him to take a supporting role, not a leading role, in his first child's life.

That feels hard from a 21st century American point of view.

From a macho point of view, it feels emasculating.

From this woman's point of view, it feels... impressive.

He humbled himself, he surrendered his own aspirations, to God's will for his life.

He said yes to the angel that appeared in his dream. (it must have been SOME angel!)

I've heard from different folks from different cultures that when babies are first born they look like their fathers. It is said that is nature's way of assuring the father the child is his, and assuring that the father will love this little version of himself.

Joseph said yes to this creature, knowing it would not look like him.

He said yes to his fiancé, a young woman, who shared at least one thing in common with him, a belief in the communication from the spirit realm that comes in through dreams.

Something other than culture, family, or community called these 2 people together.

The stars.

The angel.

God.

This child.

In Waldorf education, which our daughter Emma received for 2 years, there's a lovely ceremony at age 4 in which the teacher tells the story of each child living up in heaven, looking down, seeing their parents and choosing to enter the

world through them. It is very sweet. When the parents and children sat in that room on the floor we all had tears in our eyes.

We are DESTINED for one another.

However we come together.

Whoever we are.

We are DESTINED for one another.

Something greater than our individual selves brings us into our families, in the order we come, at the time we come.

We choose our parents.

And they choose us.

And it is all divinely chosen.

I am one who has been blessed with a loving father in my life, throughout my whole life. My father was tired of children when he found out about my existence. I was wounded when I overheard him tell my brother Bill in another long car ride at the age of 13 that I was an accident. A mistake! My parents were 40 and childrearing was supposed to be done. 5 when they had initially feared they wouldn't even have one! But, having lived in the world for close to 5 decades, these wounds are small compared to the wounds I've seen on many loved ones by their fathers. I chose well from above the clouds when I chose James Richard Randels, Sr, to be my earthly father. I found a good man, with a good heart, who followed God's will for his life over his own daily, even when, especially when, it was hard. My father has Provided me with infinite food, clothing, shelter, college tuition and an infinite number of volunteer hours, contacts with community members, and babysitting for my work with my theatre company. And as he nears the end of his of walk through this life, I know that his blessings, his teachings, his words and his deeds are firmly etched upon my forehead, in my heart, within my spirit and I am blessed to have the faith that he and his gifts will never leave me.

And I am lucky to have a loving husband and father of our child. Sean Openshaw LaRocca is our house chef and financier. He changed his first diaper in his life the night Emma was born and changed many, many after that. He leapt into fatherhood with his whole being. He wasn't sure he wanted to be a father, but the moment he laid eyes on Emma all doubt left his being. And he has been an incredible father to her, patient, challenging, consistent, carpooling. I want them to work on more adeptibility at sports, more ball throwing, more hand-eye coordination! But that is the perfectionist in me. How gendered!

When I look at who Emma chose to be her father I know that she is one of the luckiest girls on the planet, and smart to have chosen a man who has been wrapped around that little finger since it was formed inside my belly; a man who will always catch her when she falls, who will always drop everything and hold her when she cries; who will challenge her to be her better self when she is being selfish; who will challenge her to look for ways to help those in need and not wait for anyone to call on her, just do, do, do what is needed in the moment.

I know so many amazing wonderful, giving fathers. My brother is at the beginning of his journey with James Richard Randels the 3rd, little Jamie. I think of my amazing uncles. I have dear friends in this city who are walking the walk daily, with me and Sean. Inside this church, right here, right now today, you amazing fathers are with us. Please stand now, all of you who consider yourselves to be fathers, and let us acknowledge you, for the tireless, eternal work that you do in this role.

And yet, something essential to our Christianity is to acknowledge that while we ourselves may have many blessings, not everyone has had such an easy path with their fathers and their fatherhood. We do not all have present fathers in our lives. I have many sisters who are raising their children alone. There is an infinite number of children in Louisiana today who are being raised without their fathers' daily presence because our dysfunctional criminal justice system keeps their fathers locked away for years and years and years and years. And perhaps some of them should be kept away from their children; and perhaps many of them should not.

What are the internal and external forces that grow good and bad fathers? What has the patriarchy in the church and in our Judeo-Christian path done to create good fathering and what has it done to allow bad fathering to perpetuate itself? What is the church's role in growing good fathers? What is the community's role in growing good fathers? What is the state's role? What is the family's role? What is the father's role in growing his own best father? And how do we support that? How do we crush it? How do we forgive our fathers' mistakes? How do we encourage them to get back up on the horse and do better, stay in the race, we need our fathers to be present, active, loving, supporting fathers. We need our fathers to listen to their children when they say you are hurting me, you are neglecting me, you are not allowing me to be the me my heavenly father wants me to be.

Fatherhood is a lifelong commitment.

Fatherhood is a daily walk.

Fatherhood is sculpted by the children that come through the door. And the example of fellow fathers in the world.

Fatherhood is allowing the divine to move through you to your children; and sometimes it happens from beyond the grave:

After about 50 hours of labor, trying to give birth to my daughter Emma, my Gynecologist, Dr. Jennifer Lapeyrolerie, came in to the room around 8:30 and said she was giving me an epidural to make my body rest. She said if that I wasn't dilated enough by 2pm, she was going to do a C- section. At 2, I wasn't there, but my midwife, Emmie Trammel was in the room with me. And it became clear, that all that was left to do was pray. Which I learned from my father and my mother. I wanted to speak Psalm 23. My body and spirit craved those words, etched on my forehead. We pieced them together as best we could. We didn't have smart phones then. My mother later told me that she and her 4 siblings said Psalm 23 together around her father's death bed, his passage psalm. And I knew, when Dr. Lapeyrolerie came in 3 hours late, at 5pm and I was dilated and ready to push that it was Granddaddy Mac, and his father before him and his father before him and all of the fathers and all of the mothers and my heavenly father and my heavenly mother who intervened in western medicine's machine and helped my body to open up and deliver this beautiful girl into the world.

This is for the fathers who are also mothers

This is for the mothers who are also fathers

This is for the fathers who are channeling the best words and deeds of their fathers and their fathers and their fathers and their fathers

This is for the fathers who are forgiving their fathers for the wounds they inflicted upon them and evolving into a new fatherhood

This is for the gender queers who are trying to free us all of the shackles of fathers and what father has meant and what father must mean and leading us to what father can mean

This is for the fathers who see the harm patriarchy has done to their daughters AND their sons and are creating more space for the divine mother in our world

This is for the fathers we've chosen

This is for the fathers we've become

This is for the fathers we've inherited

This is for the making them all one

All one

All one

These are the words of your fathers, sung back to you here today...

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

1The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

2He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

3He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

4Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

5Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.