



THE PATTERN LANGUAGE OF FATHERHOOD

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FATHER'S DAY

ST. CHARLES AVENUE BAPTIST CHURCH

JUNE 17TH 2012

I LIVE IN A HOUSE that is swarming with sin. You see it in the unrepentant dirty dishes and the slothful, unmade beds; you notice it in the immoral dust and the iniquitous weeds in the garden.

My children complain about the amount of time needed to reform our unholy house. They long for dishes that wash themselves, laundry that puts itself away and floors upon which all motes of dust have been forever banned. In short, they only want what every last one of us pines for: A world that doesn't need reforming.

The perfect world is perfectly fine for dogs and cats and daffodils and such. But it isn't a world for men or women—particularly if they are going to insist on staking a claim to the Image of God because claiming that Image means claiming the power to choose—even to choose evil.

So how do we go about claiming the Image of God? I should like to suggest that one of the best ways is to see a pattern. A pattern is a model worthy of our imitation, but did you know that the word “pattern” contains within itself the very meaning of fatherhood, because the word comes from the Latin *pater*, meaning “father”. To be a father then, is also *to be* a pattern, to be for children a lifelong model worthy of imitation.

In a fallen world it is a father's duty to teach his children three facts.

First is the unfortunate fact that we live in a tragic and fallen world, filled with homework assignments and chores and skinned knees and brothers who won't do.

The second fact a father ought to teach his little ones is that men and women are excuse-making animals who will use the fact of a fallen world as a crutch to justify their selfish and evil choices. "It wasn't my fault," "the devil made me do it" and "I can resist anything except temptation" have always been cover stories for those who would escape the consequences of their choices.

And the third fact a father ought to teach his children is the blessed and happy truth that living in a fallen world does not mean you have to fall with it. Ours is the power to resist our fallen nature, indeed, we never lose our ability to pick ourselves up from the ground and the mud and the muck and stand *upright*. I've seen it happen.

I've seen selfish and wicked men suddenly come to themselves and choose good and do right. I've seen me do it.

Some months ago there was an eruption of shouting and squawking from the kitchen. It seems that sixteen-year-old Caroline had slapped her twelve-year-old sister Miss Katherine Grace. Caroline will tell you that it was a reformatory slap, that it did Katherine Grace a world of good and made her a better person and that in any event, even if that wasn't true, it made Caroline a better person.

For her part, Katherine Grace said she did not mind the slap so much as she resented the enthusiasm in it.

With teary eyes she said "Papa, Caroline hit me and it really hurt." It was a cry for justice if I ever heard one.

"Well Katherine," I said, "you have a choice. You may either hit Caroline—and I'll give you permission to do it—or you may forgive her. One of these is the better way...Which do you choose?"

Now can you see how this moment of choice in a fallen world gave me a chance to show off my fatherly wisdom? And can you see how if Caroline and Katherine were filled with perfect sisterly love how dull and stifling our home would be?

Anyway, Katherine thought about it for a moment and said "I'll hit her, then I'll forgive her."



Choices are unnecessary in a perfect world where sisters get along perfectly. But just you take a perfect world and throw in a sarcastic remark, or cast an envious eye, or leave one drumstick of fried chicken in a room full of hungry people and watch the fun begin. Now you have choices, and not all of them are going to be good. In a world such as ours, it is the hard choices, the tragic choices that define us as creatures made in God's Image.

The father conveys this important message about our choices in a way that is unique from the mother. He does it with manly assertion. A father is likely to say “go thou and do likewise” or “thou shalt not put your sister’s diaper on her head and call it a ‘funny hat.’” It all comes across as judgmental because it *is* judgmental. And judgment, I am very sorry to say, has become one of those nasty and pejorative words.

“Don’t be so judgmental,” and “how dare you judge me” are frequently heard in the conversations between breakfast and bedtime.

Some of our contemporaries have come to insist that judgment is out of fashion and even worse....*unstylish*, and that we ought to live in a judgment-free world. But I am rather afraid that a world without judgment must also be a world without dust or dirty dishes or unmade beds. Judgment can only be eliminated from those pure and sinless worlds where dogs do *not* perform their recreational activities on heirloom-quality carpets and where lawyers are unemployed because folks get along with one another.

Fathers are judgmental, and so it is only a world of trespasses and trespassers that can find a use for a father and his judgmental judgments.

Fathers have a discomfoting directness about them. They ask direct questions and expect simple and direct answers. It is a threatening thing—is it not?—to be in the presence of a father who looks you directly in the eye and asks “did you put the puppies in the dryer?”

I was asked that question once myself. It hung over my head like a dark cloud of shame and disconsolation, but shame brought regret, and regret brought redemption, and redemption brought resolution—I resolved that I would do the right thing and become a new boy and so I lifted my head up and looked my father directly in the eye and blamed my brother.



If mothers traffic in words, then fathers traffic in icy, intimidating stares. With a single glance my father could scare me so badly that I would return the cookies I stole out of the pantry last month.

Mothers are different. They will actually ask you a question they already know the answer to. Mothers will imply that you have choices and options that you do not actually have. “Are you wearing that dress to church, dear?” they ask so sweetly. Don’t you fall for that trick. It is a commandment disguised as a question.

Fathers are different. They’ll ask a nine year old boy how many eggs he wants for breakfast and if he says nine, why they’ll cook them and think it was a good idea and ask him if he wants more.

Where mothers have the gift of tenderness and gift-giving, fathers often have the gift of reflection and circumspection.

My parents and I had dinner with an old fraternity brother and his parents. The father was one of those garrulous and affable old fellows who could talk an ear into resignation. My father listened, throwing in the occasional nod and quietly sipping his drink.

“Ansil,” Joe asked, “do you and Jane have any other children?”

“Sure,” my father nodded, “we have two other sons,” and with that he took another sip out of his drink.

And leaning forward on the edge of his chair now, Joe asked with *great* anticipation “Are they anything like Ken?”

And thinking about it for a moment, the late, great Ansil Bickford casually took a sip of his drink and replied “No...they turned out pretty good.”



Now if making sense out of your father is a difficult task, well don't tell *me* anything because nothing tops *being* a father and trying to make sense out of children.

I have examples.

Once while driving down St. Charles Avenue, four-year-old Caroline asked me whether if she and Sydney were good little girls I might consider taking them to McDonald's?

“No, Caroline” I replied. “I would never take good little girls to McDonald's. Only if you are bad and misbehave will I punish you with a meal at McDonald's.”

I let that one sink in for a moment.

Caroline furrowed her little four-year-old brow and tried to puzzle out what she'd just heard, and finally came to the only sane conclusion possible. She said “Papa, your fired!”



A few years later the Bickfords had stopped at a roadside restaurant after twelve long hours cooped up in the car. Katherine Grace was approximately three years old and was intoxicated with the freedom of movement. She commenced running through the restaurant with her arms held aloft, joyfully screaming at the top of her little lungs.

People had begun to stare.

Mag said “Katherine, stop it.”

And so she did. For nine whole seconds.

Before you knew it, she was running through the restaurant again with her arms in the air shouting with joy at the top of her lungs.

This time Mag hissed “Katherine, I said stop it.”

It was enough of a warning to make a bishop renounce sin and it had a measurable and serious effect on Katherine. She remained absolutely motionless for nineteen seconds.

But then the tempter came—as he always does—and made a better offer and before you could say “Bob’s your uncle” she was off and running, hands in the air, raising the roof.

This time, using a tone of voice that would have stopped Satan himself, Mag shouted “Katherine! I said stop it.”

Well you can be sure that this time Katherine was reformed and chastened and sorry for what she’d done and that all of her criminal impulses were finally behind her.....for thirty-seven whole, blessed seconds.

I captured the little outlaw as she rounded the corner, arms raised aloft, screaming for the sheer pleasure of screaming and, grabbing her by the arm, jerked her around so that we were face-to-face. “How many times did your mother say stop?” I growled.

And with her little lip trembling, she stammered in a quavering voice “four.”

“And how many times does it take?” I hissed.

And with a voice now very small and frightened she said “six.”

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Only a few short weeks ago, the girls and I had just returned from church when Sydney held up a Kennedy half dollar and, pointing to JFK’s image, said “you resemble this guy!”

I said “Well you know, Sydney, over the many years of my life I have had a person or two tell me that I resemble the Kennedys.”

And Sydney said “you *really* resemble him!”

And I said “well you know, Sydney, a lot of folks thought that JFK was a handsome dude.”

And Sydney said “you don’t resemble him that much.”



I should like to suggest that there is a pattern running through these stories—these living vignettes that began in all seriousness and ended in all comedy. That pattern is the Image of God.

This brings us to the obvious fact that even when the pattern itself is perfect, the fathers who aspire to fill it are themselves tragically and fatally flawed.

What are we to make, then, of the men who tragically fail as fathers? Who are enslaved to drugs, who are violent and mean, or who abandon their families because they will not love their children more than they love themselves?

If there is a pattern here, it is a useless one. It is a pattern that has “me” written all over it—and it is useless because it cannot carry children into the future.

It is the difference between riding a horse and riding a dead horse.

There are many ways to miss a target, but only one way to hit it dead center. When it comes to reflecting the Image of God, there are many ways to make a distorted and useless mirror, but only one way to make a mirror that will reflect the truth perfectly.

The man who follows a useless pattern has made himself into a distorted and useless mirror. The Image he reflects is that of a fun-house mirror—because it corrupts and distorts God’s Fatherly Pattern into a misshapen and perverted mess. Where we should have seen the Image of God we can only see the man’s selfish and crooked face. He should have been in the business of polishing and perfecting his mirror, so that his children might look at it and see the true Image of God.



Some years back a friend of mine told me the tragic story of a seventeen-year-old girl whose parents were engaged in a ferocious divorce. The battle for custody of the daughter had raged for months and was coming to its grim conclusion—each side vigorously asserting its custodial rights to the court.

The twist here was that neither the father nor mother wanted custody of their daughter—the fight was over who had to take her.

To this day I still say prayers for that young lady.

I would like to think that she made it, that she somehow saw the wickedness and selfishness of her parents—who should have been her protectors—that somehow she saw

that wickedness and selfishness for exactly what it was: An evil choice for which they alone were responsible.

I would like to believe that she came to realize that all evil choices happen *precisely* when people turn their backs on the pattern of truth.

And most of all, I hope that she was somehow able to forgive her mother and father. Not because they deserved forgiveness—they did not—but because forgiveness **is** the pattern.

Men, and the fathers they sometimes become, are made out of soft clay. If anything, my clay is softer than most. But the pattern into which fathers are called to fit is blameless and perfect.

This tragic, fallen world has hope as long as tragic and fallen fathers will try to fit themselves into that pattern.

But be warned: fitting one's self into that pattern will cost you your life. We saw it happen with our Lord Jesus Christ, who willingly took the soft clay of his own body and broke it until it fit into the pattern of a cross.

Whether you are a father or the child of one, may the pattern of that cross be with you all of your days. Amen.