

“Dads Are Different”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull

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They are. Dads are different. Consider Michael Gartner’s father and his secret of a long life – no left turns. Since he didn’t drive after the age of 25 and came upon this secret years later, it was an easy choice. He just delegated all those right turns to his wife, the chauffeur, and lived to be 102, so there ya go!

When I think of my own late father and grandfathers, each was a model of quirky, though they all made left turns. My Dad was as gregarious as anyone I know. He loved to talk, and he would talk with anyone. A traveling salesman, he carried around a little black book, packed mostly with jokes, most of which I couldn’t begin to relate from this space. The other pages held favorite recipes, and he copied them down for anyone who looked as if lunch hadn’t happened yet. Dad was also a golf fanatic and would come close to packing his clubs in the car if he were simply going to the supermarket, just in case there might be time for a detour. And when my first dates came to the door, he embarrassed me beyond the beyond by quizzing them with the completely predictable, “And what does your father do?” While I sometimes wondered if he understood me, I never doubted that he loved me. And understanding is a two-way street.

In the grandfather arena, one was a hard working farmer. A suit he wore for funerals, his own included; but his fashion statement was a well-worn pair of Sweet Orr overalls with the memorable aroma of field, barn, and tobacco that he tamped and rolled himself. This was my Granddad Edwards, my Mother’s father. Granddad didn’t know how to talk; he bellowed, but he was as tender with his affections as he was jarring with his voice, which morphed into an audible bass when it was time to sing. With his children, he was strict and adoring. With his grandchildren, he was permissive and adoring, ever ready to take us onto his lap and teach us a song from “the old country,” as he called his native Wales, from whence he arrived on these shores through Ellis Island at the age of 19.

Then there was Granddad White, a boxer in his younger days, an early orphan who worked his way through law school, and a recluse intellectual who far preferred to sit in his musty office reading Shakespeare and Schopenhauer and put aside those legal briefs that put food and other niceties on the table. Yet he did what he needed to provide, especially when his wife, my Grandmother, left him for many years with the sole care of his two young sons – my Dad and Uncle – for whom he was a loving albeit permissive parent. Granddad White suffered neither fools nor pretense lightly. How ready he was to take us grandchildren onto his lap and whip up an imaginative yarn that spoofed fools and pretense. I adored him.

I think of my own husband, Dan, and recall our package deal as we entered marriage with three children between us. Being a Dad is tough stuff; being a Stepdad can be grueling. He’s done both wondrously and valiantly while struggling with two businesses and realizing gifts that range from engineering to scientific invention to serious writing to an ear for music that runs from

classical to hip-hop to planting a garden this summer that I'm offering tours of come August!
AND he puts up with me!

How can I not mention Rob Lemon, our son-in-law, husband to our daughter Lisa and father of our grandson, four-month-old Oliver? They're with us this morning! On the 22nd day February, with snow and wind whirling, Oliver was born. Dan and I sped as cautiously as we could across the Mass Pike, I-84, and south to New York City to greet him. Upon arrival, I recall Rob demonstrating proper swaddling technique with his newborn son. "See," he explained, blanket in hand beneath 7 pound 6 ounce Oliver, "it's just like wrapping a burrito!" Oliver now sports a "onesy" with the caption, "I get to eat because my Dad plays video games." In the marketplace, Oliver's Dad produces video games for Nickelodeon.

Dads are different, quirky even. They sire us; they adopt us; they love us; they holler at us; they chastise us; they tell us funny stories; they provide for us. BUT, not all do, and it's important to remember on this day of honoring fathers, that some of us have had rough times with our fathers. There are fathers who reject and abuse and abandon. There are fathers who really don't care or love. How to reconcile with the realities of Dads who aren't? It's not easy to face hard truths about hard fathers. It's not easy to break the cycle when recycling is not sustainable.

Dads are different. That goes for our notion of God the Father, and many of you might ask, "WHAT notion of God the Father?" God the notion has a variable identity across the pages of the Old and New Testaments, from harsh and judgmental and punitive to permissive and loving and reconciling. The variety and texture of fathers and father figures and fathers holy and unholy reflect the variety and texture of humanity itself. As children of all ages, we are graced by the capacity for resilience, that we might honor or recover from or somewhere in between the realities of the father or fathers who come to mind as we turn our minds to fathers and fatherhood.

May we honor as we will, reconcile as we might, forgive as we must, and love as we can in responding to the call of our faith that reminds us we are all connected. We are all kin. Different we are. How it plays out is who we will be. Amen

Sources:

Michael Gartner, "A life without left turns," *USA Today*, June 15, 2006,
http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/columnist/2006-06-15-gartner_x.htm.