

Reflections on Being a Father
Proverbs 22:6-9
June 21, 2020

Happy Father's Day to all fathers, grandfathers and men today. May your day be filled with conversations and reflections about what it has been like to be a father or to have a father, and we're going to talk about what it means to be a father in these challenging, troubled days. More on that a little later.

This is a different father's day, just as it was for mother's day, because there will be no family gathers, dinners and social outings due to the sheltering in place. It is also different for me in that this is the first year I will not be with at least one of my sons. The older one lives in Philadelphia and the younger in Orange County. But at some point in the day there will be a family Zoom conversation where we will catch up and check in about how each other is doing.

I feel a bit like Abraham and Sarah when God told them they would have a child in their old age. Well, we weren't *that* old! But I was forty years old when our first son was born. We were living in Wisconsin and serving a large downtown church together.

We went to the obstetrician's office on a Friday afternoon for a routine ultrasound. The nurse came out to the waiting room, and said, "The doctor would like to discuss with you the results of the ultrasound." I will never forget the words of the doctor. He said, "Well, the baby looks healthy and normal. But *the second baby . . . the second baby!*"

I confess, I didn't hear anything the doctor said after those words. "What did you say?" I muttered after I recovered for a minute from my mind racing. He said, "There is a second baby, and something doesn't look right."

It is a parent's worst fear. There is the shock of learning we were having twins, and the endless anxiety at learning that all was not well. After a couple more weeks of extensive testing over what seemed like an eternity, we learned that the second baby had a series of anomalies.

For those who have knowledge of such things, the second baby had what is called amniotic band syndrome. The doctor said he would not live. The only question was whether he would die in utero, or whether he would be still born. Furthermore,

the healthy baby could be in jeopardy because they shared the same placenta.

There were many agonizing days of worried waiting and wondering what the future would hold. Finally, the doctor decided she would do a C-section six weeks early due to the high risk of injury to the healthy baby.

So on November 18, 1995, Jackson was born a preemie at three pounds two ounces, and Jacob lived for about thirty minutes before God carried him home. That is how fatherhood began for me. There were many tears and so many mixed emotions – so much joy intermingled with profound sadness.

Today Jackson is a healthy, robust young man. And four years later, his brother Joshua would be born. Two fine young men, of whom I am immensely proud. There have been many wonderful stages of fatherhood, and I have enjoyed every one.

Today is different. As I mentioned, it will be a different Father's Day – not so much because of social distancing, but because they live a distance away. This Father's Day is also different in another way.

Our conversations lately over Zoom, and indeed many conversations throughout their lives have focused on what it meant to be born with white privilege, and those conversations have intensified in recent weeks.

This Father's Day will take on a tone of somberness and seriousness in our family conversations, because too many fathers will not get to be with their fathers because they have been killed, murdered, gunned down needlessly, senselessly by police, the latest of which is Rayshard Brooks, who was killed by police at a Wendy's drive thru in Atlanta.

In addition to George Floyd, there have been a whole host of others before him, and many of their stories hardly received attention. Let us hope and pray and work to ensure what George Floyd and Rayshard Brook's death won't be repeated over and over again.

Let us work and pray so that senseless murders will be no more. Even before this string of murders at the hands of police, black people were murdered at a much higher rate in their homes and communities than white people or any other race or background. It has to stop. Today we are at a tipping point. Today we are at an

hour of change, and the American people -- indeed, people around the world will not stop protesting and working for change until laws are passed and behaviors are changed, and people of color can walk the streets in safety. Enough is enough.

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George Floyd will not get to celebrate Father's day with his family today. Rayshard Brooks will not get to celebrate Father's Day with his family today. Breonna Taylor will not get to celebrate Father's Day with her father. There will be an empty place at the table where they should have been able to gather around and share a meal together where fathers, sons, and daughters could share the joy of being a family.

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Our family has had conversations over the years about what it means to grow up surrounded by white privilege. Today we realize more than ever, there is a long way to go. We have explained to our children that doors and opportunities will be open to them that people of color will never have.

When we lived in NJ, our boys were good friends with Andrew and his family. Andrew was African American, and I remember Andrew's mother talking about how she had many conversations with her son about how to act if he was ever pulled over or questioned by police, and why it was important to be extra polite and respectful.

Andrew said that when he started driving, he lived in fear that he might be pulled over and questioned, just because of the color of his skin. No young man or woman in this country today should have to live with that kind of fear and anxiety of what might happen if they find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Parents, have those conversations with your children and your grandchildren. Tell them why it is wrong, and why they are likely to be treated differently than people of color. Have conversations with local police and officials. That is something I have been doing lately.

Change begins with us, and it begins in our communities. The lesson from Proverbs this morning says it well: Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it. It is never too late. A father's work is never done. The important part is yet to come. Amen

Proverbs 22:6-9

Train children in the right way,
and when old, they will not stray.

⁷The rich rule over the poor,
and the borrower is the slave of the lender.

⁸Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
and the rod of anger will fail.

⁹Those who are generous are blessed,
for they share their bread with the poor.