

God, Freud and Fathers

Fathers' Day

Scripture: Psalm 103; Luke 11:1-13

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

A Reading From the Present:

... I know that my own world was defined by a polarity between a happy but somewhat impractical father and a wise, no-nonsense mother. It seems logical to me that I should see the cosmos in much the same terms. There's a wise, no-nonsense, loving feminine side to it and an impulsive, creative masculine side to it. My ideal of a whole, wholesome human being is one who combines both, whose maleness is tempered with wise femininity, or whose femaleness is balanced by a certain male impulsiveness.

It doesn't take an advanced degree in philosophy or theology to note that people's ideas of God more or less tell you nothing about deity, but a good deal about the sort of parents they've had. It is an article of faith that we are made in the image and likeness of God, but in whose image and likeness do we form our ideas of deity? Most of us, all unconsciously, pattern the image after our mothers and fathers. If our parents were loving and understanding, we tend to see God as a benevolent provider. If our parents were strict or distant, we tend to see God as an aloof disciplinarian. All theology in the world, whether administered in Sunday School or at our parents' knees, won't undo the sense of Godhood that we unconsciously develop from being around our parents.

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That, too, is a word of the Lord.

Well, it is Fathers' Day. As I was thinking about Fathers' Day and thinking about fatherhood in terms of God and human relationships and the family, I was reminded of Freud, the psychoanalyst and great scholar, who has put his imprint on all psychological understanding subsequent to his own life and scholarship, although certainly there have been those who have come along to correct him here or there or challenge him here or there. It was the conviction of Sigmund

Freud that religion's origin rests in the helplessness of the human being, that we come into this world helpless infants, totally dependent, and there is an initial attachment and bonding with the mother who is the provider of all things necessary. Eventually that relationship bonds also with the father who becomes the strong protector figure. It was Freud's conviction that human religion can be explained in terms of human impotency and the vulnerability, the helplessness and the fierceness of the human experience that cries out for comfort and support and protection and security.

Freud was an atheist but, I think, an atheist in terms of traditional, orthodox theism. He was, he said in his own words, "a godless Jew," and yet he was fascinated by religion and he continued to think about it, and particularly in the last decade of his life he was almost exclusively concerned with the nature of religion. He never changed his mind about his conviction as to religion's origin rooted in human helplessness. And he saw the religious structures, the religious forms and institutions that we have created as human beings, he saw that all as wish fulfillment. The deep-seated wish that things were safe and secure, the deep-seated wish that there would be some buffer against the fate, against the vicissitudes of life, against life's terrible vulnerability and, especially, assuaging of the painful thought of death. And so, in the creation of, in his case, Judaism, or Christianity, Western religion particularly, there was the projection of the strong father figure, that primal figure who was the security and the final arbiter of all things, so that finally life would be reconciled in all of its complexity, and ultimate justice would prevail, extending existence into another life.

Freud has not been universally followed, by any means. Nonetheless, his was an honest wrestling with the nature of religion. He also dealt in another whole dimension of his thinking which I am not able to go into, nonetheless, in his recognition of the conflict between the human being and that father figure. The one who provides comfort and security is also the one who causes resistance because of the control and the domination. And so, that conflict intrinsic to the human being, the conflict of a helpless and impotent being wanting safety and security, finding it in this primal figure of the father who is projected on the screen of reality and called God, but a God, then, who is also controlling and almighty, against whom we resist and revolt. So, the love-hate relationship, the desire for the affection and the affirmation of the father, and yet the resistance to the control and the domination of the father - all of that Freud saw in the human being's religious struggle.

As I said, Freud hasn't been followed on that altogether by any means, and he has been challenged seriously by other voices. But, the one thing that he did bring out which, frankly, I have come to conclude and I have shared with you in one way or another many times is that he is right in the fact that religion is a human product, a human imaginative creative construct. That religion didn't fall out of heaven, that it is not the consequence of some revelation of God which through the Holy Spirit was enscriptured in a book so that what we have in our Christian faith is

a divine religion authored by God. No, for all human religion is human religion. It is creative, it is imaginative, it is a human construct, and it is put together in order to meet the deep exigencies of our human situation. It is creative in order to enable us to live in some kind of serenity and tranquility in the very vulnerable position in which we find ourselves.

People create religion. The religion that we create is either good or not so good. It serves our deep-seated needs and desires, or it doesn't, and what we do, we do here, understanding that. For example, the baptismal service is a beautiful service with deep meaning, the sacramental moment in which we consciously are aware of the gift of life, the gift of a child, and of the necessity for nurture and for care, and all of that which goes into it. Likewise, the Eucharist and all of the sacraments of the Church, all of the things that we do, the vestments, everything about us. These are the things that we have created over centuries which convey meaning that enable us in an observance to bring us into the conscious awareness of the mystery that sustains us.

The only difference I would have with Freud is that he, based on Feuerbach and the projection theory of religion, says that all religion arises here in human need and is projected outward and there is nobody "out there." The only difference I would say is that that human need and that sense of vulnerability and that desire for security and comfort and some meaning in this miasma of human experience is a response. It is not the initiatory action of the human being, but it is the creative response of the human being to the mystery and the reality of our human situation.

Freud set us on the track of all of that kind of thinking and he was in line with what was going on in his own time, in Feuerbach and Karl Marx and eventually in Nietzsche. All of that development of 19th century atheism was a reaction over against that old conception of theism, of a deity "out there" in control, pulling strings, pushing the gears of the universe. As the whole scientific method took hold after a couple of centuries, and historical consciousness came to being, the whole faith structure was examined with critical rationality – the rule of the day – to where the human dimension of religion was exposed and came to be understood.

Now, I say it came to be understood. It still is not understood in the church at large. This time of the year I always go into a severe depression because, sick person that I am, I still read the newspaper about the accounts of what is going on in the respective denominations, and, if you once see religion as a human creative, imaginative construct, then you read these grand proclamations of the respective synods of the church - "God's will, God's word, God said ... God said yes, God said no. God said women should be in the clergy. God said women should not be in authority over clergy people. God said this, God said that" – it is so ridiculous. I don't know how I lived in that house as long as I did. So we still, in the church at large, have not faced up to the kind of insights that surfaced with

Feuerbach and Freud. But, on this Fathers' Day, I want to say that the possibilities for us are better than ever they have been for the recognition of the humanity of fathers, of the whole being of the male which does not exclude the female.

In the church today, that struggle is still going on. In fact, to my despair, it is in the church where these insights are resisted, and what it is is a threat to authority, of course, by male clergy all masked by faithfulness to the Bible as the word of God, all of that. It is so distressing.

But, we could move beyond it and we have moved beyond it here, thank God. We have come to see, as the little piece I read a moment ago, that the human being is not biologically determined according to cultural stereotypes, that all of us bear within ourselves the male and the female, and that it is not the cultural stereotype that says the male is this and the female is that by which we have to live. We can break free of that. We can get beyond that, so that there is not a pre-described or a preset determination of what is a man and what is a woman and what is the role of the one and what is the role of the other. We are at a time when we, I think, with critical rationality and insight that we have from all of the sciences, can see that there is such a thing as maleness and femaleness and that they are not destined biologically as ultimate absolutes. Rather, it is a cultural determination as to how the genders mix and how they can proceed in the execution of life in all of its dimensions, once again, in the church, so that the role of man or woman in the church is indifferent. There is not a reason in the world why there should be any question about whether or not a man or a woman is qualified for leadership in the community of the people of God.

On the other hand, the good news for men is that while the feminist movement has brought all of this to our consciousness and has refused to go along with those deeply ingrained cultural stereotypes, it has allowed also the liberation of the male, so that the male no longer in order to be male, in order to be a man, has to act out some kind of macho role, one in control, dominating and authoritative. That in the mutuality of male and female there can be the adjustment that fits any particular pairing which is a wonderfully freeing insight, so that no longer do we have to operate on the basis of what culture or society at any particular time has determined is the role of the one or the other.

The Bible is a book that comes from a patriarchal society so that you can't go to the Bible to solve questions of gender equality or the mutuality of male and female. It just isn't in here. And yet, there is within our tradition, wonderful treasures that can be retrieved, and I read one of the most beautiful ones this morning. Psalm 103, in the eighth verse, speaks about God being merciful and gracious, and the Hebrew root of the word merciful is the same root for the word womb, and what the text is literally saying, by way of the Hebrew poet in Israel who centuries ago had come to an insight that that mystery which is the mystery of life is womb-like. The word gracious has as its Hebrew root the word that

describes the wailing of a woman for her young that has been removed through weaning, so that in the Psalm 103, eighth verse, you have two powerful feminine images for God - a womb and the wailing of the woman for her young, that maternal yearning. And then in the 13th verse we have "God is like a father, a father who pities his children, a father who understands us fully, God who knows our frame, who remembers that we are dust." It is the most beautiful image, an image of God full of compassion, full of understanding who says, in effect, it's okay to be human. In all of your humanness, you are accepted. In all of the ambiguity of your being, in all of the ambivalence of your person, in all of the light and shadow of who you are, in your masculinity and your femininity and all points in-between, God knows your frame and God is merciful and compassionate, like a father. It's not exactly the father of Freud where there is no ambiguity there. This is a God of whom the Psalmist can write in powerful feminine terms and then speak of God as father, merciful, gracious, compassionate.

Of course, out of that Hebrew tradition comes Jesus, and the New Testament scholar, Edward Schillebeeckx says that the key to the insight of Jesus in his relationship to God was his use of the word *Abba* as the form of address. *Abba*, father. In the New Testament it says, "*Abba*, father," but father is a translation of *Abba*. *Abba* is more intimate than father. It is the most intimate address of a child to a parent, to a father, *Abba*. Jesus had that sense of intimacy in relationship to God. And he lived in that kind of spirit, obviously, because one day they said to him, "Teach us to pray." He must have lived in a kind of transcendent atmosphere such that they said it's contagious, teach us. And so, he said, "When you pray, say 'Father...'"

In our own cultural situation this has become such a problem. The feminist movement which I affirm totally has necessarily had to be aggressive and abrasive sometimes in forcing us to face the language problem. And so, in a little bit we will sing "Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost," in the Doxology, and that is a compromise. That is an acknowledgment on our part that Father, according to Freud, has been a problem for many, that that controlling, dominating figure has been a block to some in their attempt to have an intimate relationship with God. So, we will sing *Creator*, Christ and Holy Ghost.

It doesn't do it. I don't know how to do it any better, but it doesn't do it. *Creator* is not Father. We could better say Father-Mother. We could better say to you, "Say Father-Mother," whichever feels good to you. Maybe we could say Father-Mother real quick. And anybody that has a problem with that is not reacting rationally, they are reacting emotionally. Of course, in all this stuff we react emotionally because we play these cultural linguistic games and we have our identity all tied up with certain ways to do it, certain words. Language is so terribly important. Language is so important that we have to deal with language, and so we sing *Creator*, Christ and Holy Ghost.

Now I know, I watch some of you. You've never been willing to do it and you keep saying Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Well, go ahead. Bless you. But, some of you might as well say Mother, Christ and Holy Ghost. What I am saying is that we have had enough time and enough intelligence to begin to be reasonable about these things and to be able to go back to the scripture and, instead of taking a couple of texts from St. Paul in some kind of ridiculous argument that God is male and Jesus was male and therefore it is only male authority in the Church and in the home, the father. This is a strong strain in fundamentalist culture in our day. The strong headship of the father in the home. It's ridiculous. We need strength and authority and compassion and love in the home by fathers and mothers, and this idea that somehow or other God has appointed the male to be a dominant authority figure just doesn't figure.

On this Fathers' Day, I want to say, "Fathers, you don't have to be so tough anymore. You can be free from that cultural stereotype that says you need to be in charge and control, and, consequently, you mothers will have to fill in the slack. Of course, that's what's been going on all of the time. It has just been a charade. We know that.

Brian Wren, the poet and hymn writer, has written a book about language and God. It's a very good book, too, and he wrote this poem:

Gallery: A Song for Boys and Men:

Can a Man Be Kind and Caring?

Can a man be kind and caring?

Jesus was.

Can a man who's kind and caring
be adventuresome and daring,
bravely doing right, walking in the light?

Jesus did, and so I can: I will be a Jesus man.

Can a man be sad with crying?

Jesus was.

Can a man who's sad with crying,
shed his tears, yet keep on trying,
loving to the end, enemy and friend?

Jesus did, and so I can: I will be a Jesus man.

Can a man be hurt and broken?

Jesus was.

Can a man who's hurt and broken
show his friends how God has spoken,
giving to us then, power to start again?

Jesus did, and so I can: I will be a Jesus man.

From *What Language Shall I Borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology*, Brian Wren, 1989)

If more of us men would be Jesus men, the feminist movement would evaporate in a moment. There would be no need for it.