

“Notes on Fatherhood”  
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As we celebrate Father’s Day today, we pause for a moment to reflect on some of those who helped give us life. Father’s Day is a happy occasion for many of us, when we spend time with children and grandchildren, fathers and grandfathers. Dads of all kinds will be getting silly gifts, goofy cards, and the like. Some dads will be playing a little golf; others will go out to a nice lunch; still others will be glad to have that rare gift – a day in which they just don’t have to do anything.

Father’s Day, though, can also be bittersweet for some of us. Some of us have great fathers but have not been able to be fathers ourselves (even when we wanted to be dads). Others of us have mixed or even negative relationships with our fathers – relationships that may be irreconcilable. Still others of us had great relationships with our fathers who have died, and we can sometimes be reminded today not only of the love we have for our fathers but of the absence of their physical presence in our lives today.

Since each of us may have an array of feelings about our fathers, then, I suppose it is appropriate that we talk about Abraham today. Abraham is considered the father of three faiths – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and he is considered one of the patriarchs of the Book of Genesis. This ancient father, though, was not a conventional father. He and his wife Sarah had tried to have kids for years but were unable to do so. Fed up with the prospect, his wife Sarah told him to sleep with one of her servants, an Egyptian named Hagar. Abraham did so, and Hagar gave birth to a son named Ishmael (meaning “God hears”). Hagar and Sarah did not exactly get along, and there was a great deal of tension and envy in the family.

Our Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) reading for today picks up after Ishmael's birth. As the story goes, Abraham was sitting out in front of his tent, near the great trees of Mamre. The presence of trees tips us off that God is also present. (After all, where else do we find trees emphasized so much in the book of Genesis? The Garden of Eden.) A few strangers wandered by, and Abraham eagerly invited these strangers to stop in for a drink and a bite to eat. The strangers resisted at first, but they relented when Abraham insisted. So Abraham got some food and drink for the visitors. He told his wife Sarah to bake some bread, then Abraham got some curds, milk, and a calf together. He gave the food to the men, standing near a tree (again with the trees!) while they ate.

Seemingly out of nowhere, the visitors asked Abraham about his wife Sarah. After inquiring where she was, the visitors (or was it God?) told Abraham that Sarah would give birth to a son within a year. (Remember: Abraham and Sarah had been trying to have kids for years and couldn't; and now, Sarah was, as the text puts it, "past the age of giving birth") Sarah overheard what God (or was it these visitors?) said, and you can imagine her reaction. "I'm going to have a kid? Yeah, right. After trying for years and then giving up, now that I'm so old that even a fertile woman couldn't have kids – now I'm gonna give birth?" As you might imagine, Sarah laughed at the prospect of giving birth at this point in her life. The visitors heard her, and asked why Sarah laughed. She denied it, but God (or was it the visitors?) insisted that she did. And later on in Genesis, we see that she does, in fact, get pregnant, and she gives birth to Isaac.

So I guess it's fair to say Sarah was not a conventional mother, and Abraham was not a conventional father. In today's terms, Abraham might be a fifty-something dad dropping his son off at elementary school every morning, while the other dads in their twenties and thirties eyed him with curiosity and called him

“sir”. Abraham, who would become the father of the great Semitic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, was not a conventional father. And he did not have a conventional family: he had children by two different mothers (one of whom wasn’t even his wife), and he was not on good terms with his first son’s mother. And he did not have a “traditional” family (married parents and child) until well after the age that he was “supposed” to be having children. Still, God was revealed to Abraham in the form of strangers promising a child through Sarah. And so we see God revealed in an intimate family setting.

So as we celebrate Father’s Day today, we rejoice with those dads who look more conventional to the eyes of the world. But we also remember that one of the fathers of our faith was an unconventional parent, and so today we recognize those unconventional parents in our midst, as well. We recognize the dads who had kids late in life. We recognize the dad who raises a child to whom he is not biologically related. We recognize the granddad who ends up having to function in the role of the dad. And we celebrate with those whose only real experience of fatherhood is with the God that Jesus called “Father.”

And so today, as one of the dads in our midst has been leading us in song and another has been leading our liturgy, as we recognize all the fathers in our midst (in their myriad forms), and as we remember Abraham, the unconventional father of our faith (and the Jewish faith, and the Muslim faith), let us do so in a spirit of gratitude for all those dads in our lives, those male role models who inspire us and encourage us and support us in various ways. And remember: not all dads look or sound alike. So keep your eyes open. You never know when a visitor in your house could reveal the presence of God, and you never know when someone who might not seem like a “normal” dad could end up being a better father than you could have imagined.

AMEN.