"Freeing the Fathers, Freeing Us All"
a sermon by Rev. Preston Moore
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
Williamsburg, VA

June 15, 2008

During the first half of the twentieth century, there lived a physicist named Wolfgang Pauli, who was highly esteemed by his colleagues -- and likewise by a young girl named Madelynn, whose father told her entertaining anecdotes about him.

Madelynn's favorite one concerned Pauli's effect on experimental equipment, which often mysteriously malfunctioned in his presence. In 1948, a free-spirited Italian physicist named Beppo Occhialini decided have some fun with Pauli's jumpiness about this jinx. He rigged up a lamp hanging in his laboratory so that it would crash to the floor when anyone opened the door. Having tested the mechanism carefully, he talked Pauli into visiting his lab. Pauli opened the door . . . and nothing happened.

Madelynn's father amassed a treasure trove of anecdotes like this for her – all of them about physicists. Some of the anecdotes concerned physics itself -- the falling apple that led to Isaac Newton's discovery about gravity; or the cannon balls Galileo dropped off the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa to study how fast they fell. Other anecdotes focused instead on the lighter side of being a physicist, like Richard Feynman's penchant for playing the bongo drums.

Later, when she was in college, Madelynn sheepishly confessed that for most of her childhood she thought the word "anecdote" actually meant "a story about a physicist." Her physicist father is Hans von Baeyer. Hans apparently was a skillful storyteller. You'd have to be very good to make a little girl melt into laughter with a story that ends with the words, "and nothing happened." For Hans, the stories were a source of closeness. In our church we are blessed with fathers who are blessed with having that closeness with their children.

These storytelling experiences sent two important spiritual messages to Madelynn. The first one went, "you are seen and accepted, with great joy, for exactly who you are. Even before you can contribute anything beyond your unadorned humanity, you are worthy." The second one went, "everyone has a creation story. Here's an important piece of yours – about who your father is. He's a physicist, but he's also lots of other things, including a storyteller, and, a bit of a comedian."

The storytelling experiences also sent an important spiritual message to Hans. It went, you are affirmed as a creator. The "cre-ature" of you is growing before your very eyes. Your creation of her continues long after her physical birth. Parenting calls for your full humanity, not just some specialized skills. You are seen and accepted in this fatherhood role, with great joy, for exactly who you are. You are worthy.

At first, this message comes mostly from his spouse, and possibly a few others who are around enough to observe closely. Gradually, this message begins to come from Madelynn too.

At first, he's like a god to her – that's inherent in parenting. But over time, he "disdeifies" himself, and she comes to see his humanity. I made up that word – "disdeifies – in case you were wondering.

As we heard in his testimony this morning, Robert Vinson totally surprised himself in discovering an intense desire to send and receive these kinds of messages. This led to a wonderful upending of his life plan. His struggle for the opportunity to be a parent is testimony to the deep capacity of men for love and intimacy.

Very different parent-child messages are sent in Mona Simpson's 1992 novel, The Lost Father, which is about a girl named Mayan who is abandoned by her father just after she was born. For years, Mayan and her mother, Adele, put their lives on hold, fervently waiting for his return. As an adult, Mayan recalls this waiting. "He could come back, any day, so we had to be ready all the time. When he came, we knew, we had to be there and open the door. We would not get a second chance. And on that day, he would look at us and judge. It was like a surprise inspection. My father was like God."

Adele had created a private religion for herself and her daughter Mayan -- her own personal version of fundamentalist Christianity, with its Second Coming, apocalyptic Day of Judgment, and ascent of the faithful into Heaven.

Adele didn't really want a god as big as the whole wide universe. Just a small, controllable one – no bigger than a Marvel Comics superhero. She didn't really want love and intimacy either. Just liquidity and vanity -- an ATM that looked nice in a suit and tie. When they finally gave up on Mayan's father coming back, her mother simply became a serial monotheist, searching endlessly for the man who would be her one true God. "He'll buy you things," she told Mayan of this hypothetical replacement father, "just you wait and see." As Mayan described it years later, "any man with certain assets would do" for her mother.

At the age of 28, Mayan goes to medical school, a dividend of coming to adulthood when the feminist movement was really taking off. She realizes, though, that her strange childhood religion is still with her. She cannot move forward without unraveling the mystery of her lost father. She hires detectives and slowly pieces together his wanderings. The search consumes more and more of her time and money, but she can't stop.

Finally, she finds him -- Mohammed Atassi, an Egyptian by birth who came to America and took the name John. He refers to his own father as "a god" -- someone who controlled the price of wheat in all of Egypt, before losing everything in the country's shifting political climate. In Egypt, John says, he was in line to be Minister of Finance. He recalls his family's pride when the newspapers called him "The Egyptian John F. Kennedy."

Mayan's questioning of her father reveals the pattern of his life since he vanished from hers – changing jobs, gambling and bad debts, starting and ending relationships with women would tell him he really was a god . . . and most all, disappearing again and again.

When she presses him about why he never tried to reconnect with her, he is reduced to saying, "I can't take this kind of confrontation. I need time to reflect." Mayan replies "I've been reflecting for twenty-nine years." In a letter to her months later, he still has nothing to say about ignoring her. He declares, with no recognition of the irony, "It had nothing to do with you at all." He wallows in his own regrets, saying, "If I'd stayed [in Egypt] I'd be running the country now. I really could have, with my connections, my family. I'm telling you, Mayan – I was the John F. Kennedy of Egypt."

Looking back later, she realizes "he was only a man with his own troubles who didn't manage to keep track of his wife and child. After all those years, I was wrong about him. He was only a man." This critical piece of her own creation story enables Mayan to free herself from the gender straightjacket that binds her parents. Her father's flight from fatherhood really does have nothing to do with his expectations of her and everything to do with his own and everyone else's expectations of him. His inability to be God, or even John F. Kennedy, is too much for him to bear.

The Lost Father presents an extreme case. But does anyone doubt that one version or another of this story is unfolding somewhere all the time? There are no simple explanations for why some fathers – like Hans and Robert -- thrive on fatherhood and others flee it. But the way our culture has shaped gender roles provides some pretty big clues.

Spiritually, our patriarchal culture has been very costly for both women and men. The promotion of feminine fantasies of male omnipotence has kept women small and created crushingly heavy expectations of men. Many mothers have born the impossible burden of being emotional dialysis machines for the whole family. Cultural stereotypes of masculinity have severely limited the opportunities of many fathers for intimacy and for what might be called emotional literacy. In families where mothers and fathers have made a sharp division of labor between parenting and income-earning, many women have been denied the chance to express their full humanity; and many men have been denied the breadth of intimacy that go with parenting – a child climbing onto a lap, or giving a hug; a parent giving loving attention to the bumps and bruises and splinters of childhood, physical and emotional.

The feminist movement has opened up opportunities for many women to broaden the expression of their humanity by stepping into roles formerly played mostly by men. This shift has done much to dissolve the cultural stereotypes of paternal omnipotence and maternal dependence so vividly represented in Mona Simpson's novel. It has done so not only by strengthening the civil rights of women but also by breaking up deeply rooted cultural stereotypes of women as creatures suited only for certain roles in society and not others.

Much needs to be done to remove the remaining obstacles to women expressing their full humanity. The same is true for men. The civil rights of men concerning reproduction and parenting have a long way to go, and cultural stereotypes of maleness have been highly resistant to change, as Robert discovered when he stepped outside of those stereotypes in seeking out the role of single male parent. But legitimizing a wider range of roles for both men and women to play in society will not dislodge the deeper masculine stereotypes that shape the very fabric of our social values. These stereotypes arise from culture rather than biology.

I'm talking about the exaggerated forms of culturally masculine stereotypes that tilt our values toward prizing conflict and combat over accommodation and negotiation; competition instead of cooperation; rational intelligence instead of emotional intelligence, and individualism instead of community. These priorities show up in the workplace, in our social attitudes, and even in our parenting – when we get competitive about our children's education, for example. And it's getting worse. We are more competitive than ever, more individualistic than ever, more combative than ever. Our country is considered a bully around the world. The SUVs are bigger; even the barbecue grills are bigger.

The auto section of Friday's Daily Press carries a splashy piece BMW's new "6-series" cars. The standard model has a 350 horsepower turbocharged engine, yours for only $76,000. Or you can get another model that isn't so underpowered: it has a 500 horsepower turbocharged engine with ten cylinders. The headline of the article on this new line of cars is "You Are Worthy." As long as we get our theology from the auto section of the newspaper, does anyone really think anything is going to change?

Maybe we should call these cultural stereotypes machismo instead of just masculine –that's how extreme it's gotten. This kind of environment promotes the development of a thick skin and a closed heart. It does not engender love and intimacy. We can't expect to wall off our roles as parents from these influences.

The progress of women toward equality with men has brought them to an ever-closer embrace of these culturally machismo stereotypes. A striking example can be found in the recent presidential primaries. Politics is a risky topic for a minister, but sometimes the symbolism of what's happening there is just too palpable to pass up. At the beginning of the primary season, Gloria Steinem wrote a New York Times op ed piece explaining why she supported Hillary Clinton. Among her reasons, one stood out: that Senator Clinton was the candidate with "no masculinity to prove." But Senator Clinton apparently concluded that, politically at least, she had an 18-wheel truckload of masculinity to prove. So she tossed back shots of Crown Royal whiskey and beer chasers in a bar called Bronco's in Crown Point, Indiana. She rattled the nuclear saber, declaring that the United States would "obliterate Iran" if it attacked Israel. And she repeatedly struck the pose of a pugilist, someone who settles things with her fists.

Near the end of the primary season, Susan Faludi, a widely respected feminist leader, praised this brand of politicking. She saw in it a shift away from women invoking the power of civilizing rules and high standards, and toward women calling on the raw power of the "take no prisoners" warrior. "In that visceral subbasement of the national imagination," she observed "– the one that underlies all the blood-and-guts sports imagery our culture holds so dear – the laurels go to the slugger who ignores the censors, the outrider who navigates the frontier without a chaperone."

Susan Faludi was glad that, as she put it, "our first major female presidential candidate isn't doing what men always accuse women of doing. She's not summoning the rules committee over every infraction." But instead, Senator Clinton was doing what women have always accused men of doing: shoving and brawling their way to what they want; settling things with their fists.

Susan Faludi said it was "debatable" whether Clinton's "pugilism" – her word -- had elevated our politics. Honestly, do you think it's debatable? She was sure that when a woman does "ascend through the glass ceiling into the White House," it will be because Hillary Clinton "got down with the boys." Maybe so, but what kind of role will be waiting for that woman candidate when she gets there? To play the bully boy, swaggering across the deck of an aircraft carrier in a flight jacket under a banner that boasts "mission accomplished?" To be held hostage politically by the macho wing of the electorate?

As a matter of civil rights, women should have the right to be just as puerile and pugnacious as the worst machismo men, and just as scornful of the idea that it's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game. But that doesn't mean they should exercise that right, any more than men should. Machismo is just as harmful in women as it is in men.

No matter how much we realign the gender roles of men and women, if we do not address the machismo inflection in our basic values, no real transformative change will follow. For that, we need a spiritual revolution carried out by men and women collaborating closely. Kind of like dancing. In this church, we want a world in which everyone gets to dance, whether you're a man or a woman, a father or a mother; whether you're a man whose dance partner is another man, or a woman whose dance partner is another woman; even if you're that startling phenomenon, the single-parent father. But inclusiveness will not make tomorrow's world different from today's unless we throw away the old dances and get some new ones. So let's put away the brass knuckles and let the dancing lessons begin.

AMEN.