

Sermon: "The Father Figure" (Matthew 1:18-21)

Father's Day is celebrated the third Sunday in June every year, without fail. It is a day to honor the men in our lives who have loved, nurtured, provided for, guided, and encouraged us. On this special day, some of us think about our biological fathers who have always been in our lives. The men who helped bring us into the world have been there with a steady hand as we learned how to crawl, walk, talk, develop, and grow into the adults that we are today. Where would we be without their love, their support, and their discipline, right?

But in some cases, there are some of us who didn't have our biological fathers in our lives. I know we like to give a "Happy Father's Day to all the fathers" in our American church services each year, but let's be honest: for one reason or another, some of us didn't have the men that helped make us in our lives long-term.

For some, their father died before they were born. For others, their father died soon after they were born. For others, their father died when they were teenagers or just before they finished high school. And for others, their father was always absent, from the delivery room up to now. Some women raised their children alone because the men, the fathers, didn't want to have the commitment or obligation of raising children. It's one thing to make a child, but another entirely to raise a child, and some of us live for the pleasure while passing the pains of childrearing on to mom or dad, grandparents, and so on.

And in other cases, the biological fathers didn't even know they had a child in the world because the women, the mothers, simply didn't inform them. You may think that every woman does everything right, but watch Paternity Court sometime --- you'll discover that some women never notified the father that he had a child or children in this world. You can't be responsible for being a father if you don't know or never knew you had children. Knowledge is power and, without knowledge, one may have power, but he or she cannot act on what they know little about.

But I think that the common understanding of Father's Day in the United States trains us to have what I call "tunnel vision." We see Father's Day as rather one-dimensional: it's only about the biological men that have raised us. Oh, we honor grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and even uncles, and, to be sure, they are often biologically related to us.

But, have you ever thought about those who didn't have their biological father in their lives? I know, I know, we don't wanna approach this topic. There's often too much hurt, too much pain, too much drama associated with the fact that certain men weren't there. I understand and feel your pain. I had an experience similar to that, too. I had good biological men in my life, but I didn't have my biological father in my life much growing up. My father and I have made many strides in our relationship compared to where we were nearly 20 years ago, but just know that I know that hurt, that pain. It's easy to tell ourselves that we're over it, but you'll never fully get over that pain. No child should be raised without his or her biological parents. No one should ever have to say the words, "My father wasn't there."

And, even as I discuss in this moment that my biological father wasn't there, we can't forget those children who were adopted at birth. In some cases, these adopted children don't know their biological father or mother. They were raised without their biological father, too. Though some of us were raised by other biological male figures, these individuals weren't raised by any biological figures on either side of the family. They have no idea where they came from, their family history, traditions, and so on.

Like Clark Kent, the character of Superman played by Dean Cain in the old TV show, "The Adventures of Lois and Clark," they feel as though they landed on earth by being "dropped out of the sky." For all they know, they might as well have been, since they know nothing about their true identity. They lack a sense of belonging that children born to their biological parents take for granted.

But, those of us with the absence of our biological fathers carry this pain in our hearts. And so, around the holidays, it resurfaces. We are reminded

that, as families gather together to feast on food and fellowship and exchange gifts, that “my father isn’t here.” And even if you had your biological father in your life and he died sometime ago (be it weeks, months, or years), you still feel the absence of your father, too. Absence, whether deliberate or due to death, leaves a void in all our hearts that nothing but the Lord can fill. And even then, we won’t be truly satisfied until we see our Savior’s face in glory in eternity.

Those of us who carry this hurt, though, rarely stop to approach things from the perspective of the men that DID raise us, though. Think about it: imagine what it was like for them. If you had a father figure in your life, you are blessed. Some individuals never even have a father figure, never even have a male, to show them what it is like to be a man or to have a man’s respect. You and I may not have had our biological fathers, to be sure, but if you had a man in your life that saw you grow up, graduate high school, go to college, and even get married, you are blessed. If you had a father figure to make you one of the most important people in his life, you are blessed.

And even if you were adopted, think of how interesting a task it must have been for the father figure that raised you. He must’ve thought to himself at times, “I can’t believe I’m raising another man’s child.” This runs through the minds of men a lot. Even on *Paternity Court*, the first thing the potential father says when asked why he isn’t paying for child expenses is, “I’m not taking care of a child if I don’t know he or she is mine.” Men concern themselves with raising “their” children, their biological seed. It’s a matter of male pride to raise up a “Jr” that looks like them and carries their last name. And so, it takes a lot for a man to raise someone else’s child when he doesn’t know if the child is his or not. Imagine how much more effort it takes to raise the child when he has 100% certainty that the child in question isn’t his!

But we often take these father figures for granted, and some father figures take their roles for granted. I remember some months ago that I was talking with someone about DNA and family history. I’ve been on this huge DNA

kick since about 2 years ago. I wanted to do a DNA test to discover my roots and ancestry when I was 12, but I was too young then. I promised myself that when I turned 18, I'd finally do a DNA test for curiosity's sake. But life got in the way. The next thing I knew, I was 24.5 years old and my mom had died of a three-year battle with metastatic breast cancer. But when my mom died, and my mom's parents turned sick, I longed to know more of my family. The end of last year, I started that pursuit in a more tangible way than just combing through genealogical records (birth certificates, death certificates, marriage licenses, marriage applications, birth records, and so on): I decided to submit my DNA to the most reputable companies in the world.

I'm talking with this father figure about a cousin I'd discovered through DNA, a person I've known most of my life though I didn't realize we were kin. And he said to me, "Family is more than just DNA." That wasn't all he said, but at the moment he said that, I paused and took a moment to inwardly reflect.

The individual in question, a father figure in the life of his own son, understood all too well what it meant to raise another man's child. He has, for over 30 years now. This father figure has been there through crawling, walking, first steps, talking, hair cuts, doctor's visits, checkups, all the way through elementary school, grade school, and high school, and graduation. And now, his son has given him a grandchild. And this father figure knew his father and his father's siblings and family. He went to family reunions every year to visit his cousins and see the family growth. He never once questioned or wondered about his family roots and his biological father, yet he found himself raising a son that wasn't his.

You'd think with all the time that had passed between the day he received his son, and the present, that he'd have clearly grown to appreciate the role God gave him in the life of this young man he raised. I always thought that this father figure's disappointment over his own hurt was something that surely would've faded by now. It had been so long ago, or so I thought. But it hadn't left him. This father figure was still hurt, after all this time, over his

loss in his own life, of a goal, a dream, a wish he had that hadn't come to fruition.

And so, while I wanted to believe that he was disqualifying DNA because he didn't care about it, it wasn't that; the issue at hand was his own hurt over his own disappointment and tragedy, his own sadness over his situation. He mourned that adoption was his only option.

And so, while it hurts some of us to admit that our biological fathers weren't there, it hurts some father figures that they had to be fathers to us because they couldn't father their own children. Some of us mourn the absence of our biological fathers. Others mourn the loss of father figures in general. And then, some of us wanted to be father figures --- just to our own children. And it hit me in that moment that when he said "Family is more than DNA," he meant it because he'd lived it. He'd been "more than DNA" to his own son in his life.

But I think this is a good thing to talk about and get out in the open. So many of us come to church on Father's Day with our hurts and grief over this very thing. You may never hear it, but women aren't the only ones who cry over hurts and pain. Men do, too. They may grow up and act as if they're too strong to cry, but they do. Men break down and cry over their grief, just like women do. And no matter how much they bottle it up inside, it doesn't hurt any less. One of those hurts that few men ever express is the pain inside over not being able to father their own biological children.

And yet, despite this hurt, most churches don't talk about it. "It's too painful," we say. Many of us want to be respectful of those who have dealt with such a blow and give them room, time, and space to deal with it in their own way. What few of us have ever stopped to think about, is that the Word of God, being our comfort, is designed to give consolation in even this area.

Yes, though you may never have thought about it, the Word of God has been designed by God Himself to comfort these father figures who mourn the loss of what they never had and what they may never have.

And in walks Joseph. Here in Matthew chapter 1, we read of a man named Joseph who was betrothed or engaged to Mary. And before they officially tie the knot, as we'd say today, Mary was found to be pregnant. She was, as we read it, "with child." This means that Mary was pregnant. And so, Joseph suddenly discovers that his fiancée, the woman he's engaged to marry, is pregnant. And she's not just pregnant. Perhaps it would've been better if the child were his, but the child isn't. He hadn't been intimate with her. They'd had no sexual intercourse, so the pregnancy wasn't his fault or responsibility. Mary was pregnant with child, and the child wasn't his.

If he were like the men who appear on Paternity Court, he would say, "the child is not mine, and I'm not paying for a child that isn't mine." It's likely he felt this way, since the text tells us that he "was minded to put her away secretly" in Matthew 1:19. Joseph wasn't even legally married yet. Marriage was a huge task, nevertheless fatherhood. And Joseph may have had concerns about the child's biological father, who he was, whether or not he'd want his role as father later on down the line. And what about Mary? Could he trust that, if he married her, that she'd be faithful to him? She'd already been unfaithful with another man, so he thought. It would be a bad investment to give so much to someone who'd cheat on you with someone else. And then, to marry them would be an even crazier thought. And what about if this man came back into her life after the baby was born and really wanted a family with Mary and the baby? Where would that leave him? And what would that mean for him, the man who'd taken on the role of another man for another man's child? And what if he had become too old at that point to have children? He would've given all his fathering years to a child that wasn't even his, a child that belonged to another man. He would've given all his fathering years away... to discover there were none left for a child or children of his own.

And Joseph could've thought to himself, "there's no way I'm getting tangled up in a marriage...with an unfaithful woman AND a child that's not mine?"

Oh no...I think that, if this is a play, I'll take a bow and make my exit stage left."

For Joseph, the entanglement was endangerment. But we can understand Joseph's perspective bc we've told some men in our lives something similar. Our son, brother, cousin, or nephew comes home and says, "my girlfriend is pregnant, and I think I'm the father." The first thing many of us will say is, "Get a paternity test. You can't know for certain the child is yours until you get a paternity test. Don't assume anything. Get the test done first. It may not be yours, and you don't want to throw away your life on somebody else's child. You don't want the woman to have you up for child support all your life, and the child is not yours. You don't want the child getting your military and job benefits, retirement, or social security, and the child is not yours." We'd tell the men in our lives to do everything they can to look out for themselves and not let the thought of being a father cloud their judgment or overwhelm them to such an extent that the woman could take advantage of them.

And then, for some men, they'd tell them to think long and hard before they, single and without children, would date a woman who has a child or two, for example. "Are you sure you want to go from being a single man to being a husband AND a father at the same time?" We'd ask. Plenty of us have told our male relatives to think things through before making a decision we could live to regret.

Joseph was a righteous man, a God-fearing man, Scripture tells us. But some of you are a bit better than Joseph bc, unlike his desire to end things quietly without fanfare, you've been in a similar situation and taken on the child or children as your own, even when you knew they weren't. You didn't put an end to things, you didn't call the woman out and make a spectacle of her. No, you just said, "ok. I love her, and I'll love the child. The child will be mine and hers, and we'll make the best family we can."

But Joseph wasn't that optimistic. He just felt betrayed by her, and hurt... and overwhelmed. It was too much to take all at once. And so, his

response is the thought of every person in such a situation: "save yourself, get out of it, escape with your dignity, move on with your life."

Joseph wanted to be a father to his own children with Mary. He didn't commit to being the father figure for another man's children. And, that aside, he was blameless in the entire situation. He had good intentions to marry Mary, but he didn't intend to marry a woman already pregnant. He'd have to endure a lot of scrutiny and criticism and ostracization to be her husband. "No, no, no," he told himself. The answer in his mind was "no."

We can't really blame Joseph. How many of us have thought this way? And if we were in his shoes, how many of us would have said and thought the exact same thing? I've seen dear friends endure a lot of hurt and pain in their married lives, including infidelity and divorce, and I have told them over the years, "You're a better woman than me. There's no way I could've stayed after he cheated on me. There's no way I could've put a smile on my face while going to marriage counseling for something I didn't do, something I'm not guilty of, all to make him happy and try to repair a marriage he damaged in the first place. I just couldn't do it. I WOULDN'T do it. You're definitely a stronger woman than I'll ever be." So I can certainly understand Joseph. I'm sure you can, too. There was no marriage counseling back then when couples fell apart. There was no pre-marital counseling for couples that were thinking about marriage. So Joseph had a decision to make: his fiancée was pregnant. What was he going to do? How would he handle this situation?

Joseph wanted to avoid the mess that Mary made. Yes, he believed Mary was guilty. But he didn't want to put her on display and make her wear, as a book title says, "The Scarlet Letter" for all to see. Nope. He wanted to end things quietly, privately, so as to not disgrace her. He wasn't gonna stay. He didn't intend to stay, not after she'd been unfaithful. To Joseph, it was a bad investment to stay. It would be wise, in his thinking, to simply pull out and count his losses while he could still get out -- before the losses started piling up.

It's funny how many of us think like Joseph. We don't wanna get messy in life with anyone. We want clean lives: no mistakes, everything just the way we want it. We don't mind making mistakes, but we don't want others making mistakes on us. And yet, it was in the mess of the situation he found himself in that God's light shines. For, contrary to Joseph's thinking, Mary hadn't cheated on him. Mary had been faithful to him, and, above him, she'd been faithful to her God, her Lord. And God was rewarding her for her faithfulness, not punishing her because of her unfaithfulness.

What Joseph thought was a mess, a curse, an end to the good he'd planned, was really a beginning: for, though he didn't know it, the child was a means to blessing, not a reminder of a mistake or sin. In verses 20 and 21, the angel that visits Joseph in his dream tells Joseph, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21). "That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit," the angel says, a reassurance to Joseph that marrying Mary is the right thing to do because she's been faithful to him and to God. And Jesus would be Savior. Joseph, then, would become male guardian to the Savior of the world. He would be known forever as the Jesus' earthly father, the earthly father of the Son of God. What a title and position to hold!

Now, for Joseph, it's a great confirmation of where he is in his life, where Mary is, and where they can go together. He's got a fiancée who's been faithful to him, who hasn't cheated on him and slept around with another man. He's got a wife-to-be who is having a son because of God's favor on Mary, not because of an indiscretion. And he gets to be "the father figure" for Jesus. But I realize that a lot of men don't end up with the same great news as Joseph. Some men end up on the wrong side of it: left to raise a child that their wife conceived while in the marriage with them. Some men find their fiancée has already cheated on them before they even set a wedding date, and the moment they marry, find themselves becoming not only husband, but also father.

And I'm not leaving women out: there are some women who barely have an engagement ring on their finger before their husband-to-be says, "I got a girl pregnant." These men and women who are innocent realize that, since their spouse or engaged other is soon to become a parent, in a sense, they must become a parent, too, to help their soon-to-be spouse with the unborn child when he or she enters the world. These circumstances aren't as blessed as Joseph and Mary's, to be honest. Someone has been unfaithful and sexually impure and God isn't pleased with it. And yes, the faithful fiancée finds himself or herself wondering what to do. "Yes, I'll just drop the engagement and call off the wedding. I won't make such a big scene of him or her but I'm getting out of this while I can because I deserve better."

But perhaps in the mess, there is a blessing. A lot of men would say, "I don't wanna raise a child that's not mine," but the blessing may come in raising that child. Think about it: if it were you, if you were that child, wouldn't you want the man in your life to raise you, to be the father figure in your life --- even if you weren't biologically his? What children want most in life is to be loved and cared for, encouraged and prayed for. And that child just may be counting on you to step into a scary role because his or her life depends on it. Sure, it's not your child. You're angry. And I can't blame you. Your girlfriend/fiancée hasn't been sexually pure, like Mary. Mary was a virgin; your girlfriend isn't, if she's having a child and it isn't yours. And I realize it's enough to scare anyone, but think of it like this: perhaps what can be seen as a mistake could turn out to be a blessing for you and the child.

Men in particular live to have children that are biologically theirs, offspring they can pass down their traditions to. And men think it humiliating at times when they have to raise children who aren't theirs. I understand how men can approach raising another man's child that way. But you know what, I've got a little insight into what it's like to see a father figure in action. Let me tell you a bit about my story.

I wasn't raised by my biological father. My parents separated when my twin sister and I were 5, then divorced when we were 9. I grew up being raised

by my mom's dad, my granddaddy, the only man that stepped up to the plate to be the father figure that I needed. I wasn't his responsibility in that I wasn't his biological child. He didn't make me, and he wasn't responsible for me. He didn't have to take on the responsibility of helping raise 2 children after he had already helped raise his own 3 biological children. But he loved us. He loved us so much that he didn't want mom raising us alone. Grandma didn't want mom raising us alone. And so, we became grandma and granddaddy's third and fourth daughters and their fourth and fifth children to raise. From basketball practices, volleyball practices, to academic clubs, book clubs, spelling bees, band practices and performances, and everything in-between, mom's mom and dad picked us up from events and took us to them while mom worked full-time. And when mom went on business trips, grandma and granddaddy would bathe us when we were babies and tuck us in while mom was halfway across the country --- only away from her children because of her job, not because of desire.

My granddaddy and grandma decided to help raise mom's twin daughters because we were their family and they wanted to help all they could. My grandfather didn't care whose children we were. We knew our dad, sure, but circumstances being what they were, dad wasn't there. My father wasn't there. I realize that for some, the idea that Pastor D.M. could ever understand what it's like to not have a perfect life is shocking, but let's just say that, if you knew everything about my life, you'd know my life has never --- and I mean, NEVER --- looked like perfection.

But despite how we got here and who didn't step up, my mom's parents had a whole lot of love to give, and they gave it. Every single day. And they gave me a place to hang out with my cousins in the summer, memories in the backyard in summer when we'd go barefoot around the yard. We'd play sports together, ride around town together in the backseat with grandma driving. Granddaddy was always growing vegetables in the garden and 40 and 50-pound watermelons. And aside from that, he would often drive us to town and take us to his job. He was so proud to be a working man.

But my granddaddy, whatever the reason, was my father figure. The one father figure in my life I could count on. I could run to him about anything and everything. He didn't wanna see me cry, and he'd do everything to make the situation right. I was crazy about my granddaddy, my father figure, and he was crazy about me. I always said that if I married someone, he'd have to be like my granddaddy. I've joked that marriage is out of the question for me because there aren't many like my granddaddy nowadays. He was the father figure in my life, an irreplaceable man who left his mark on my life in a million ways. There are moments when I joke like him and I sound so much like him, you'd think he was still in the room though he's been gone a year ago this month.

He took on the responsibility of raising another man's twin daughters. And some of you men are wondering if you can marry the woman of your dreams and take on her twin children. Some of you women out there are wondering if you have what it takes to be a stepmother for your husband's or husband-to-be's children. And some of you grandparents are wondering if you can raise your grandchildren because, whatever the reason, the children can't raise their children. But, Joseph did it. He did it. God blessed him and told him to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife. And I want to say today, don't let fear of the unknown hold you back from making a difference in that child's life or in the lives of those children. And if you're a stepparent or a stepfather or stepmother-to-be, don't fear helping raise children that aren't biologically yours.

Why? Remember that Joseph was selected by God for the task of being Jesus' male guardian. Joseph was the one that saw Jesus say His first word, take His first steps, learn Hebrew (after all, Jesus was Jewish), learn how to do carpentry work. Joseph was there for all Jesus' biological milestones as His father, in every way except the biological. Biology is important. It tells us where we come from, who our people are, and ultimately provides answers to the questions we have about our identity, but it's true what the person I mentioned earlier said to me when they said, "Family is more than DNA." That statement is true. Family IS more than DNA. When there are people together who love each other, share

memories, and grow together, THAT's a family. That's what a family looks like. And in the end, Joseph didn't need to be Jesus' biological father to raise the child. If he wanted to be a father, here was a blessing. It may not have been what Joseph expected, but God told Joseph in so many words in his dream that being Jesus's earthly father was a blessing, not a curse.

And for you to influence a child's life for the better, regardless of biology, isn't a curse either. It isn't a punishment on you for something you've done. It could be a blessing if you focus on the child. That child needs you. And that child is willing to give you a chance if you're willing to give him or her a chance.

Joseph was human. He was imperfect. Like us, he assumed that Mary had been unfaithful. There isn't a person hearing this sermon under the sound of my voice that wouldn't have had the same response. No man says, "Yay! I get to raise someone else's child or children! I'm ecstatic!" And for some who can't have children of their own but find themselves raising others, raising children is a reminder of what they couldn't biologically do themselves. I understand it isn't easy. It's easier to preach it than to live it, you'd tell me. I'm sure it is. I agree with you. It's easier to say all the right words than to have to live them out when things don't go your way.

But remember, being the father figure is a blessing because every child needs a father. Every child needs a mother. The child needs a parent to steer the course of his or her life, to help them figure out right from wrong, what to do in certain situations. That child needs a confidant, to know that his or her parents are always there if he or she ever needs to talk. And yes, as that child gets older, he or she will have to learn about how mean other children can be. Eventually, that child will play sports and deal with mean teammates and opponents, mean classmates, and even mean teachers.

And that child will learn about hormones, how hormones make you do crazy things when you think you feel something for another person. Then there's the dating, when every father figure shows the child's date his extensive gun collection -- hey! My grandfather did it for my sister's dates. I

never scared anyone off because I didn't date, but my granddaddy always let the dates know that he wasn't afraid to protect his granddaughter, my twin sister. A good man will go to his last to protect his child. To my granddaddy, we were his daughters, as if he'd fathered us himself. And he would have done anything he could within his might to protect us and see to it that we were safe. He was the best man in my life, hands-down. This year, as Christmas comes this week, it's easy for us to struggle to find joy. COVID is all around us, and so many have either been infected or died. I messaged a former classmate this morning who lost his grandmother recently, though it wasn't from COVID. But there are many who've died from COVID, including a cousin of mine this year and a friend of mine from seminary. And in-between, I lost a dear great-aunt that I loved as though she was biologically related but wasn't. See? I told you family is bigger than DNA, didn't I?

But as we try to focus on the story of that blessed morning when our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ entered the world, we focus so much on Mary, who gave birth. And rightly so. We focus on the angels in Luke that came and praised God at His birth, as they said, "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." And rightly so. We focus on the shepherds in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night, who get to proclaim the message of His birth. And rightly so. We focus on the Magi, the "wise men," who traveled to visit Jesus when He was 2 years old and present Him with gold, frankincense, and myrrh, gifts for a King. And He was the King of the Jews. And He is the King of the Jews, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And rightly so.

But often, we simply overlook Joseph. He was just a substitute for God the Father, some seem to think. We downplay his role in the story, but think about it: He was the husband of Mary. As such he was the one who determined the stability of the household. He was the husband and the father figure, whom God came to in a dream when the Lord told him to take Mary and baby Jesus and flee Bethlehem because Herod was seeking to kill Jesus. We diminish his role in that we don't talk about him much, but we should start a new tradition. Let's look at Joseph and remember that, as

much of a blessing as it was for God to choose Mary (yes, women, God can choose you for great callings and service; don't let any male or female tell you otherwise!), it was also a blessing for Joseph to be the father figure of God's only-begotten Son.

Men, to influence a child's life, to be the father figure they look to, confide in, lean on, love, and support, and to see them grow to a place where one day they can show their love and gratitude, become a child you are proud of, and support you, is one of this earthly life's greatest blessings. You may find yourself in a broken situation because of someone else's actions, but you can be the one God uses to bridge it together and fight for the family unit. You.

There's a blessing in being the mother who biologically has the child. There's a blessing for the child, and the purposes God has on the child's life. Every child is a gift from God, regardless of the circumstances in which he or she was conceived. Every. Single. Child. But fathers, being the father figure is also a blessing. And the best father figure you can learn from is God, who watches over and cares for His own.