

## **“A Spirituality for Fathers”**

**Genesis 1:1-2:4a**

**Rev. Rob MacDougall**

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Twice a month I receive a magazine called *The Christian Century*. It is the publication I have read most consistently in my life. I find its articles to be informative, sometimes inspiring and always provocative. One of the provocative pieces in the magazine is an uninterrupted corner where they simply post various statistics and survey results.

In the most recent edition of the *Century* they printed a graph showing trends regarding the opinion of the U.S. population on the question “will today’s youth have a better life than their parents?” The graph shows that in 1983 54% of those surveyed said that youth will have a better life than their parents, this percentage rose to a peak in 2002 when 66% of those surveyed said youth will have a better life, since 2002 the number has been plummeting until the present time when only 44% of those surveyed believe that youth will have a better life than their parents.

The graph is jarring, the plunge beginning in 2002 is cause for concern as it reflects a lack of optimism toward the future,

The most obvious piece of information missing from the graphic is some kind of definition of what “a better life” means. It could be that the pollsters simply asked the question without further definition, allowing the respondents to decide for themselves what it means. My guess and maybe this is a cynical guess, is that “a better life” has a lot to do with financial and material wealth – will the next generations have more money and stuff. However, there could be lots of other interpretations of the question – it could mean will the next generations have meaningful jobs, will they earn enough money to afford a house, have some leisure time, etc. In our day the unemployment rate, the accumulation of wealth by a very small part of the population and many other issues threaten just a basic quality of life for much of the population.

As a father of three young adults I am always concerned about my kids work opportunities and their ability to support themselves and a family if they choose to have one. But I also know that “quality of life” includes much more than economic success, especially if economic success entails striving for millions of dollars at the expense of ethics, relationships, being a workaholic, etc. We all need a livelihood, meaningful work, and other quality of life resources, but we also need spiritual and relational resources that give purpose to everything else in our lives.

One of my favorite writers, Wendell Berry, wrote a poem about his father, his integrity and spirit that gave purpose and created happiness in life. Listen to Berry’s poetic admiration for his father’s substance:

What did I learn from him?  
He taught the difference  
Between good work and sham,  
Between nonsense and sense.

He taught me sentences,  
Outspoken fact for fact,  
In swift coherence  
Discriminate and exact.

He served with mind and hand  
What we were hoping for;  
The small house on the land,  
The shade tree by the door.

Garden, smokehouse, and cellar  
Granary, crib and loft  
Abounding, and no year  
Lived at the next year's cost.

He kept in mind, alive,  
The idea of the dead:  
"A steer should graze and thrive  
Wherever he lowers his head."

He said his father's sayings  
We were standing on the hill  
To watch the cattle grazing  
As the grey evening fell.

"Look, see that this is good  
And then you won't forget"  
I saw it as he said,  
And I have not forgot.

Berry's poem speaks of learning what his father loved and how his father continued to love them into the generations that would follow. Being able to discriminate good work from sham, nonsense from sense; being able to say what you hope for and working for it, mind and hand; remembering the past, the dead and caring for the future, investing in the place where you are; and seeing that what is around is "good," not evil, scary, an enemy, an obstacle, but "good".

It would be impossible, particularly as he repeats his father's words, "Look, see that this is good," to not hear Berry's poem as a description of his father's spirituality. Almost word for word his father was quoting the phrase repeated over and over again in the creation story that we heard from the book of Genesis. After each day and element of creation scripture says that God stopped, looked around at all he/she made and said "it is good" and sometimes not just "good" but "very good".

God didn't offer any qualifiers about creation's goodness, nothing about whether there was enough of this or that, whether something was sufficiently beautiful or useful or not. God simply said, "it is good."

What an amazing thing to be able to say about all of what was made, it is good. There is wonder, acceptance, hope, delight and power in this beginning. But it is not just about the beginning, it is about the ongoing essence of life and creation. God is proclaiming that all that has been made is in its essence "good".

A few weeks ago I was privileged to visit Heli and Marifer and Tomas in the birth center at the hospital. Tomas was just a day old and was/is beautiful. Marifer and Heli talked about how they just keep watching Tomas – each wiggle, breath, scream and facial expression. There was wonder, hope, joy, concern and a deep sense of gratitude that filled the room. The spiritual essence at the time of this birth seemed a great deal of what I think God was expressing at the time of creation, "it is good." Life is good, this baby is good, this place is good. There were no qualifiers, even though there would be plenty of things to take care of, worry about, provide, but there was no question about the goodness of this life.

Today has been designated Father's Day. The origin of Father's Day is different from Mother's Day. While Mother's Day began as a rallying day when mothers raised their voices against sending husbands and their young adult children to war, Father's Day came about much later and was proclaimed for the sake of gender parity – if we have a Mother's Day, we should also have a Father's Day. But just as Mother's Day was originally about women claiming their power to shape our nation's soul, I believe that Father's Day can be about the role fathers have defining "a better life" for future generations. And I would say that the spiritual life of fathers is central to the definition of "a better life."

In his poem, Wendell Berry offers four dimensions of what his father's spiritual life consisted of, which, I believe, can offer strong direction to the spiritual life of fathers and all men.

The first dimension I have already spoken about, "Look, see that this is good, and then you won't forget." The place to begin is to see and honestly believe that what you see is good. Though life is complicated, people are complicated, to look out and say that life is good, is a powerful place to begin. Stop when you start to say "it's all going to hell in a hand basket," or when you start to say someone is "rotten to the core," or when you nostalgically want to say "it was better back in the day." If a father cannot say that the life that surrounds him is good, why would he participate in bringing a child into it? The spirit of a father must include a sense of wonder, beauty, hope, joy and love. These are not possible if one believes the world is essentially destructive.

The second dimension of his father's spirituality has a deeply selfless quality, "no year lived at the next year's cost." In the church we might use the word "stewardship" for this dimension. This spiritual dimension recognizes the gifts that have been given to us and that we have a responsibility to care for these gifts that we might pass them on to the next generations.

This dimension does not allow for the exploitation for the earth, wildlife, or even the universe. It does not allow for the abuse of people and nations. The costs of exploitation and abuse are too great for the next year, the next decade, the next century. We have been given much, it is our place to pass on the gifts of life to those who follow us.

The third dimension of Berry's spirituality is that of being able to discriminate between nonsense and sense, good work from sham. While I do not believe that our spiritual lives are all black and white, I do embrace the perspective that we should be able to identify lies and false pretenses. We need to have some skill, wisdom and integrity when it comes to recognizing and embracing the truth. The Bible records that we are to be wise as serpents, not easily led astray. Being a person of faith is not the same as being foolish or living a delusional life.

The fourth dimension found in Berry's poem comes from this odd saying, "A steer should graze and thrive where he lowers his head." Berry lives in a rural part of Kentucky so his wisdom often uses images from the land and farms. Another phrase he could have used is, "the grass is always greener on the other side of the hill." The spiritual strength that is being pointed to in these words is that of living fully where you are. Instead of hoping for what is not present. Learn about the people and place where you are.

For Berry, the best parts of life are those which you know in depth, the parts in which you have seen joy and sorrow, in youth and in older age, in each season, time of day, rising and falling. Graze and thrive where you lower your head.

These are four dimensions of a spirituality that men can embrace and can pass on. When considering the question, "will today's youth have a better life than their parents?" perhaps the answer should have more to do with whether parents have lived a rich spiritual life that can be passed on, than it should about financial standards. God knows what we need, what we need first is spirit filled lives and all the rest follows from that.