Following in the Footsteps
A Sermon for Father’s Day
Deuteronomy 6:1-12

Suffolk Christian Church                Suffolk, Virginia

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Father’s Day

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Deuteronomy 6:1-12
New International Version (NIV)

These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not
provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

The Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God!

Tom, a father of five children, won a little toy one day in a raffle at his office. He took the toy home and had to decide which of his five children would receive the toy.

So, he asked his children a series of questions: “Who is the most obedient? Who never talks back to Mother? Who always does what Mother says?”

The children thought for a moment and finally all five little voices answered in unison, “All right, Dad, you get the toy!”

What is a father?

A father is a person who is forced to endure childbirth without an anesthetic. He growls when he feels good and laughs very loud when he is scared half-to-death.

A father never feels entirely worthy of the worship in his child’s eyes. He is never quite the hero his daughter thinks he is. And he is never quite the man his son believes him to be. And this worries him sometimes. Because of that, he works a little too hard to try to smooth the rough places in the roads his own children will travel.

A father is a person who goes to war sometimes . . . and would run the other way except that war is part of an important job in his life, that of making the world better for his child than it has been for him.
Fathers grow older faster than other people, because they, in later wars, have to stand at the train station and wave goodbye to their sons in uniform as they climb onboard the train.

And, while mothers cry where it shows, fathers stand and beam . . . outside . . . and cry inside.

Fathers are men who give daughters away to other men who aren’t nearly good enough, so that they can have children that are smarter than anybody’s.

Fathers fight dragons almost daily. They hurry away from the breakfast table and go off to the arena, which is sometimes called an office or a workshop. There they tackle the dragon with three heads, known as Weariness, Works, and Monotony. They never quite win the fight, but they never give up.

And when Father passes away, and after a good rest, he won’t just sit on a cloud and wait for the girl he’s loved and the children she bore. He’ll be busy there, too . . . repairing the stars, oiling the gates, improving the streets, and smoothing the way.²

When our church was part of the United Church of Christ³, each Spring the ministers in the Southern Conference would gather for a retreat. One year, at Atlantic Beach, North Carolina, I took a walk down the beach before supper. I was walking on damp sand which was packed down, and it was a great surface on which to walk. There were not many people out that evening and it was a very peaceful walk.

When I turned around to return to the hotel, I looked at the footprints in the sand. I wanted to see if I could pick out my own footprints. Have you ever noticed your footprints? They are distinctive. Some of us walk with our toes out, some with our toes pointed in. Some footprints show a long stride, others a shorter one. But I could not mistake my own footprints in the sand that day. I even looked at the bottom of my shoes to check the pattern on the sole just to make sure.
Men, we are making prints in the lives of all the young men and women who are coming after us. May I repeat that? We are making prints in the lives of all the young men and women who are coming after us!

If these young men and women follow your footsteps, where will they end up? Will it be someplace you will be proud for them to be? Or will you hang your head in sorrow that they have gone that way? Only you can decide which it will be.

Did you notice the advice Moses left for us in today’s Scripture reading? The people of God had been making lots of footprints in the sand. They had traveled a long way – on foot – from Egypt to the promised land of Israel. And Moses, speaking for God to the people, wanted to remind them that their lives are not just lived in the physical realm. The most important dimension of their lives, Moses is saying, is the spiritual one.

“These are the commands, decrees, and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe . . . so that you may fear the Lord your God as long as you live.” Fathers, there is nothing you can do . . . absolutely nothing . . . that is more important than this, to know the commands, decrees, and laws of the Lord and teach them to your children.

They are so important, Moses reminds us, that they are “to be upon your hearts”. “Impress them”, Moses says, “on your children. Talk about them”, he says, “when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” Now if you haven’t realized their importance, Moses goes even further. He says, “Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads⁴. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

I think what Moses is saying is that we are to make the pursuit of holiness in knowing and following our God the absolute number one priority in our lives and show our children how to walk in that way as well.
Jesus put it this way: “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:33, NIV)

I have been fortunate to have lots of good clear footprints to follow in the path of my life. My father, John Raymond Halley, made it very clear to my sister, to my brother, and to me how he wanted us to live. Honesty, hard work, and commitment were his values that he taught us.

But a young person needs his or her father’s teaching to be supplemented by other men in their lives as well.

And so I was also fortunate to have Jim Roberts as my Scoutmaster in the Boy Scouts. The Rev. Leroy Keeney modeled Christian manhood for me as my pastor and first mentor in the ministry. They and others left very clear footprints in the sands of time and much of what I have been able to be this day is due to them and to others who led me.

Men, this is an awesome responsibility! But it is one which can not be delegated, nor ignored. It is not something we can look to our wives to do for us and I believe one day there will be a judgement on how we have done.

Seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness. . .

I have this morning a huge challenge for each of you men. I am speaking now to all men, not just to fathers. All of us can act in fatherly ways, so this challenge is for every man in our church.

Men, whatever your age might be, I want each of you to begin a deliberate and intentional ministry of speaking to every man and boy in this church who is younger than you. These boys and young men and even our middle-aged men need other, older men to look them in the eye, shake their hand, and receive a word of encouragement. “How’s it going, young man?” Or, “Hang in there, my brother.”
Now, of course, you will not be able to speak to every younger man, but my challenge is that you will not leave this building on Sunday mornings without having made a deliberate and intentional effort to speak to younger men. Look them in the eye. Show genuine interest in their life. Pat them on the back. Tell them you are proud of them. Ask their name if you do not know them. Shake their hand. Let them know how glad you are to see them here in church.

Can you rise to this challenge? Remember, you are already making an impression on the younger men. You are already making footprints. Now I am urging you to get more deeply involved in this process we call building a Christian man.

We are all making footsteps. Let’s make sure they lead to godliness and to true righteousness.

Let us pray:

O God, You are our Father, and we know that You care for us. Thank You for providing for our salvation through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Thank You for giving us the privilege of being in Your family and serving You. May we be about the business of building Christian homes and pursuing true righteousness all our days. Bless our fathers, that their footsteps will lead their children to know You. We pray this in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Amen.
1. This story was posted by Pastor Tim Davis on his website several years ago, www.cybersalt.org. He is pastor at Westside Bible Church in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

2. Author unknown; in Laughter for a Saturday, June 18, 2005.


4. “The Orthodox Jews – hundreds, if not thousands of years ago – took this verse literally and came up with actual, physical ways to comply with this command. They wrote down the words of YHWH [Yahweh, or God] on pieces of parchment, inserted them in little boxes (called Tefillin) attached to bands, and literally tied them to their hands and foreheads.” From “What did YHWH (Yahweh) mean by: ‘Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads’?”, at www.therefinersfire.org/phylacteries.htm.

5. Consider a few other translations of this verse:
   • “But more than anything else, put God’s work first and do what he wants. Then the other things will be yours as well.” (Contemporary English Version (CEV), copyright © 1995 by American Bible Society)
   • “Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need.” (New Living Translation (NLT), copyright© 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013 by Tyndale House Foundation)
   • What you should want most is God’s kingdom and doing what he wants you to do. Then he will give you all these other things you need. (Easy-to-Read Version (ERV), copyright © 2006 by World Bible Translation Center)
6. My father was born in Gallipolis, Ohio, on December 23, 1918, and died in Barboursville, West
    Virginia, on September 17, 2005.

7. I was a member of Troop 50, Buckskin Council, sponsored by my home church, Highlawn
    Baptist Church, in Saint Albans, West Virginia. I received my Eagle Scout there in 1961.
    Scoutmaster Jim Roberts was a wonderful role model who invested many hours in the lives of his
    scouts.