

**A Testimony about Fathers
(Unprepared Message)¹**

By Donne Hayden

Good morning, Friends.

I have something written, but I am feeling led to give it to you as a testimony today rather than a prepared message.² A testimony about fathers. In fact, I'm going to move away from the lectern and speak from the bench.

Father's Day is difficult for me. Like some of you perhaps, I did not have an easy relationship with my father. In the past ten years, it became even more complicated than it was when I was growing up, and I have gained perspective. This past week, hovering in the back of my awareness was the knowledge that Father's Day was coming up, and I don't have a father any more. At one time I had at least two. In some ways, I had three fathers.

I had my great-grandfather, Papa. We lived with or near Papa and Grandma until he died when I was thirteen. I was always Papa's Baby. He was my best friend; he was loving and compassionate, and if I had any strength of character or sense of self-worth at all when I got to be a teenager, it was probably because of Papa.

The other father was my stepfather, M.P. Morgan. My mother married him when I was about eighteen months old, and I was never told that he was my stepfather. In those days, such things were much less regulated than they are now, and it seemed to my folks easier and less

¹ Transcribed from tape of Meeting for Worship; a few editorial changes made.

² See prepared-but-undelivered message following this "testimony."

complicated not to have me torn between two fathers. So I was raised to believe Morgan was my real father; I called him “Daddy” when I was little, “Dad” when I was older, and throughout my childhood and youth, my name was “Marsha Donne Morgan.”

Dad was a difficult father. He was demanding and arbitrary and authoritarian and controlling, sometimes abusive—emotionally abusive. He whipped me with a belt when I was a kid, and nowadays some would call that abuse. At the time, however, it was considered “discipline.” I honestly don’t feel I was physically abused; I felt the emotional abuse more deeply.

The older I get, the more I look back at things Dad taught me things that no one else taught me. However bad a father he might have been, he was better than no father at all. Through him, I got some balance in my early childhood; I got someone who held me to high standards. I couldn’t talk him out of things—for instance, when I got a “C” in 10th grade geometry, Dad talked to my teacher and the two of them agreed that if I solved 200 geometric proofs (outside my regular homework) in the next quarter, my grade would go up to a “B.” (I worked for nine weeks proving geometry theorems, but only finished 175 problems. Dad was disappointed in me, of course, but ...)

I remember things Dad taught me. For instance, from him I first heard: “I cried because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet.” And when I got my first job, he—who grew up on a ranch in southern New Mexico—told me, “Make ‘em a good hand.” I was about sixteen when he told me that, and ever since, whenever I’ve taken a new job, in the back of my mind I hear Dad’s words: “Make ‘em a good hand.”

Dad was permanently disabled when I was seventeen; *he* was only thirty-seven. He was an accountant and a justice-of-peace—an up-and-coming politician, planning to run for a seat on the county commission. One night at a local bowling alley, he was badly beaten with a lead pipe and suffered permanent brain damage. (He was beaten up because he was a difficult person, not just for me but for a lot of people).

After he was hurt, I discovered some things about him that I didn't know. Like the day an old black man came to our door. The news about what happened to Dad had been in all the state and local papers. Dad was the only one who saw the person who beat him up, but he remembered nothing of the entire week before he was hurt. Dad was still hospitalized, and the local police were searching for whoever had attacked him when the white-haired black man came to the door of our house. This was the early 60s and our town was still segregated; black people lived in one quarter of the town and stayed out of other parts of town; we lived in the poorer part of the white side of town, but I had never seen a black person there before. I answered the door, and the old man asked to speak to Mrs. Morgan, so I called for Mom. When she came to the door, he took his hat off and said, "Mrs. Morgan, I come to tell you that if it was one of *our* people that did this to Mr. Morgan, we'll get him. Because Mr. Morgan was always good to us. He treated us fair." My mother thanked him and he walked back down the road toward the other side of town.

I could tell much more about my stepfather, but I want to talk about my real father, whom I met about five years ago for the first time since I was eighteen months old. It *did* seem like a "God-thing" that I found him; I never had looked for him; I wasn't trying to find him, and yet I was almost taken by the hand and led to him. I was in my late 50s; he was in his late 70s.

He lived in Liberal, Kansas, and I drove there to meet him. He was everything I had ever wanted in a father: he was warm, loving, compassionate, witty, gentle—all those things that my stepfather had never been. My half-sister, who is two years younger than me, told me that when she was a child, if she got in trouble, she always ran to our father because he would keep anyone from scolding, punishing or spanking her at all.

All this has meaning for me today because I have been thinking about our concepts of God, our relationships with God, and our relationships with our own earthly fathers. I had two kinds of fathers, and they can be related to two understandings of God. As a child, somehow I always *knew* there was another father somewhere; I *knew* that it wasn't true that this stepfather was my father; it just didn't feel right. Similarly, inside, I have always *known* there is a good, gentle, loving and compassionate God, very different from the heavy-handed, authoritarian, wrathful, punishing Old Testament God I heard about in the Southern Baptist church. It just didn't *feel* right that such a figure could be the real God; I had trouble "believing" in such a God.

When I met my real father, Marshall Hazzard, he was 77 years old, and almost the first thing he did was roll up his sleeve and point to a dark-blue tattoo on his upper arm. Faded but still legible, I read my birth name: ""Marsha Donne Hazzard." He told me that when I was eighteen months old, and he and my mother divorced, he agreed not to come around to try to take me away. But when he went back to San Diego, he had my name tattooed on his arm so that if we ever met, I would *know* that he had never forgotten me.

God is like this real father to me.

On the back of today's bulletin, I included a quotation from Desmond Tutu about God.

. . . God does not love us because we are lovable. We are lovable precisely because God loves us.

Before we could engage in any effort to earn God's love, it was given to us as a gift. We get all worked up because we reckon that we must persuade God to love us. But God already loves and accepts us. God has loved us since the time before eternity. That love is God's gift to us.

In fact, everything is a gift. There is nothing to earn. Unfortunately, somewhere along the line we have been inveigled and misled by the culture of achievement. We really can't understand unconditional acceptance. We think there must be a catch somewhere, so we tie ourselves in knots in the effort to impress God. We strive and we strain to earn what is already ours.

I believe that no matter what I've done, no matter where I've been, no matter how I grew up, no matter what I have become, when I do encounter God, I will find my name tattooed on His arm.

My Father, My God (Prepared-But-Undelivered Message)

by Donne Hayden

I have three questions for you this morning. First, what was your father like? (This is all part of that question: Was he kind and loving? Was he strict and demanding? Was he violent and abusive? Was he mostly gone? Second, what is your relationship to the God of Hebrew and Christian tradition? Third, in your own experience, do you see any relationship between your responses to these first two questions?

God the Father in the Old Testament is *occasionally* portrayed as gentle and compassionate; *often* he is warlike and violent, *frequently* judging and condemning, *sometimes* absent, and *at times*, he is portrayed as what could only be called a downright abusive parent. God as Father is a dominant image in our religious tradition, which makes us, of course, God's children. In the section on "Love of God" from his book, *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm puts it this way:

The God of Abraham can be loved, or feared, as a father, sometimes his forgiveness, sometimes his anger being the dominant aspect. Inasmuch as God is the father, I am the child. I have not emerged fully from the autistic wish for omniscience and omnipotence. . . . I still claim, like a child, that there must be a father who rescues me, who watches me, who punishes me, a father who likes me when I am obedient, who is flattered by my praise and angry because of my disobedience.

Fromm asserts that this image of God reflects immature spirituality, by the way.

Many people are apparently comfortable with the Old Testament kind of God, and in fact, cling to the image of the all-powerful parent who will surely come to save us from

ourselves. Is this perhaps an indication of how fathering is being done today, and/or how people feel about their fathers? As one theologian put it, because we have no *model* besides our own human experience, *we continue to imagine God in our own image*. I suggest that, more specifically, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, we have imagined God in the *image of our own fathers*. In the Old Testament are examples of various kinds of fathers among the ancient Hebrew tribes, as well as examples of cycles of violence and abuse, which unfortunately have been passed down in the tradition through the centuries.

The teachings of Jesus reminded humanity of the gentle and compassionate father, the one who loves as unconditionally as a mother, one who delights in the return of an erring child and welcomes the child unreservedly, one who is generous with love and rewards, a Father who does not require low bows and lofty titles, but who does hold us to high standards. The ancient Hebrews believed God required praise and sacrifice, sometimes of their own lives or those of their children; that God required placating and flattery. Their prayers were formal and beseeching: “*LORD God of Israel, [there is] no God like thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath, who keepest covenant and mercy with thy servants that walk before thee with all their heart*” (1 Kings 8:23) or “*Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness: thou hast enlarged me [when I was] in distress; have mercy upon me, and hear my prayer*” (Psalm 4:1). Jesus taught people to pray to a different sort of father (Mat. 6:10-13). Jesus didn’t begin with lofty phrases, humbling himself before Almighty God. When you pray, he said, pray like this:

*Papa,
May your name be revered,
may your influence rise and be known.
Provide us with the bread we need for the day.
Forgive what we owe
to the extent that we have forgiven those who owe us.*

Amen.

The kind of fatherly God Jesus emphasizes *does* appear throughout the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament in verses such as the following:

You may not know me, but I know everything about you. Psalm 139:1

I know when you sit down and when you rise up. Psalm 139:2

I am familiar with all your ways. Psalm 139:3

You were not a mistake, for all your days are written in my book. Psalm 139:15-16

You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Psalm 139:14

I knit you together in your mother's womb. Psalm 139:13

And brought you forth on the day you were born. Psalm 71:6

My plan for your future has always been filled with hope. Jeremiah 29:11

Because I love you with an everlasting love. Jeremiah 31:3

My thoughts toward you are countless as the sand on the seashore. Psalms 139:17-18

And I rejoice over you with singing. Zephaniah 3:17

I will never stop doing good to you. Jeremiah 32:40

I desire to establish you with all my heart and all my soul. Jeremiah 32:41

And I want to show you great and marvelous things. Jeremiah 33:3

If you seek me with all your heart, you will find me. Deuteronomy 4:29

Images of a violent, wrathful father God overwhelm the image of a loving, patient, merciful Father who appears in these lines. Particularly for people with an abusive father, such loving images fade in comparison to more violent images of God. Though the message of Jesus contradicted the image of God as that type of father, his later followers re-imposed the

harsher, judgmental nature of God when they interpreted his message to be “Believe or Else.”

We can't seem to escape the experience of our own fathers.

One person who knows a different kind of God the Father is Desmond Tutu. I was moved by a passage in Tutu's book, *Made for Goodness* (which he co-authored with his daughter), in which we find a God who loves unconditionally

. . . God does not love us because we are lovable. We are lovable precisely because God loves us.

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In fact, everything is a gift. There is nothing to earn. Unfortunately, somewhere along the line we have been inveigled and misled by the culture of achievement. We really can't understand unconditional acceptance. We think there must be a catch somewhere, so we tie ourselves in knots in the effort to impress God. We strive and we strain to earn what is already ours.

All this about fathers makes me think of my own, of course. I had both fathers—the Old Testament father—my stepfather, who was demanding, conditional, arbitrary and controlling, and sometimes emotionally abusive. Still, in spite of this, he gave me a moral foundation on which to build my life. My other father—the real father I never knew but always suspected existed—I met when I was in my 50s. He was kind, compassionate, warm and witty. That father, who had not seen me since I was two years old, had my name tattooed on his arm so that if he ever found me again, I would know that he had never forgotten me. This is the kind of God Desmond Tutu knows—the father who loves and accepts us, who has loved us since before eternity, whose love is a grace-filled gift freely given to us whether we think we deserve it or not.

May your father be kind and compassionate, and may you believe in a God who has your name tattooed on his arm so you will know He never forgot you.