

“Perseverance”

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Father's Day/ Trinity Sunday

Romans 5:1-8.

Today is father's day, a day when we usually celebrate the fathers in our life with gifts and brunches, and even a day off church. Father's day has an interesting history. It was born in the United States, back in 1908. It started out as a church service, a memorial for 362 miners who had been killed in a coal mine in West Virginia. That service sought to honour the fathers who had died supporting their families in dangerous work. The next year, in the state of Washington, Sonora Smart Dodd promoted the idea of of father's day holiday that was modelled on Mother's Day. It would have gifts and even flowers for fathers. It slowly took off, getting a big boost from store owners in the Depression, who were eager for extra sales.

Here in Toronto, the champion of father's day was Norman Birrell.

Birrell billboard

He owned a menswear shop on Bloor near Bathurst. He wanted Father's day to be like a second Christmas for men in the summer, which would be good for business.

Birrell Windows display

Here's one of his shop windows, designed for father's day in 1927. The sign says ties are on sale for a dollar a piece, and you can see children giving Dad a tie in the background.

He promoted Father's Day in Toronto as a way for shops to make it like Christmas Day in June, good for sales. This idea really caught on during the Depression. Father's day became established here on Canadian soil.

But what's surprising about father's day was the resistance it faced. Many men objected to the idea. It seemed too sentimental, too similar to mother's day. Men didn't want to get flowers or

gifts like women, they said. Besides, most of the time the money that paid for the gifts came out of their own pockets.

Those men obviously lost the battle. Father's day is now a firm tradition in Canada and in many countries. And yet, there is still a tension built into it. We call it Father's day even though many families don't use that term. They may call their male parent "dad" or "pop" or even use their first names. The word "father" has a connotation of being formal and distant. Fathers have authority, and expertise in the outside world. They have the power to reward and to punish. In days gone by, they were the ones who were expected to punish children physically.

Few of us would want that kind of emotionally distant father to come back. Since the 1960s, our society has preferred fathers who are more relaxed, less cold and distant. We've come to expect fathers to be dads, to be ready to take part in child raising, to be more intimate and emotionally available for their children. We've also legally accepted that gay men can be Dads. Kids can expect to be at school with other children who may have two Dads at home. The era of the Father figure who is to be feared has given way to a friendly father who is more nurturing.

Part of the reason for this shift is that the way we work has changed. Back in the 1950s, few middle class mothers worked, so fathers really did have more authority. They were experts in how the outside world worked, and they often brought in all or most of the money. Children were expected to be nurtured by their mothers, but only the father could teach them how to get ready for the world of work. That was a time when there were television shows with titles like "Father Knows Best." Men weren't in charge because they were smarter than women. They were in charge because women weren't allowed to work once they got married or pregnant.

But in the 1960s, that started to change, and so did the roles of fathers, and of men, generally. As more and more women entered the work force, including mothers, men lost their monopoly on knowing the ways of the world. It took time, as wealthier families could afford to keep mothers at home for longer. But in our time, it is common for both parents to work. Even if a mother takes time off to raise children, she has often been in the workforce for many years before she gets pregnant. Today, both mothers and fathers bring in money and know how the world works. And that has meant that the role of being a father has changed.

And it is a change some people do not like. For the past ten years, male influencers on social media have been railing against this shift. They feel that modern life has emasculated men, giving too much power to women. YouTube personalities like Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate

have argued that women should be at home fulfilling their destiny as mothers, while men should be the ones out in the world working, exercising their masculinity. Christians have jumped on this band wagon, too. They use the Bible to justify a traditional understanding of the role of fathers and husbands. They point to passages written by the Apostle Paul who says that husbands should be led by Christ, and wives should be led by their husbands. (Ephesians 5:23).

This call for a return to traditional male roles and fatherhood is playing an important role in the way they view the purpose of government. Vice President J.D. Vance has spoken often about how men need to get back in power within their families. Dads need to become fathers again. That masculine vision is also at work in the way the President rules the country more like a king than as a public servant. The current president is sending the national guard and the army against his own people, like fathers used to use the belt against their own children.

Daddy headlines

In fact, some high profile Trump supporters have taken to calling Trump “Daddy”, expecting him to punish citizens as though they were his children.

On this father’s day, we need to recognize that the rise of authoritarian governments are usually framed as a father taking charge of a family that is out of control. The leader is usually seen as the father of the nation who will use law and order to set things right. Citizens, who have a right to disagree with their leaders, are denounced as irrational or disloyal children, who need to be silenced. Protesters, like the ones in California, will be given time outs by being thrown in jail.

Trump’s military parade***

Yesterday, President Trump held a military parade in Washington. It was held on his birthday, the day before Father’s Day. The President is sending a clear message about who is in charge, and that he can use force to get his way.

Authoritarian governments invoke the kind of father who acted like an absolute ruler. This kind of father can overrule the protests of sensible family members. In politics, father figures will persecute the weakest members of society to silence opposition, and to prove we need a father to protect the peace.

It was exactly this kind of power that inspired the scripture passage we heard today. It comes from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul is writing to Christians who live in Rome. Paul has never been there, but he wants to visit soon. He is writing to people who live in the shadow of the emperor of Rome, the ruler of the Western world.

Claudius

And in the year 49, a new Emperor, Claudius, takes the throne after the previous emperor is assassinated. This statue shows Claudius dressed as the god Jupiter, a reminder of his vast power over mortal citizens.

Early in his reign, Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome. According to one Roman source, the Jews had been causing too much disturbance due to someone called "Chrestus". This appears to be a reference to Christ. Scholars suspect that Jews in Rome had been arguing over whether Jesus was really the messiah. Claudius was against any kind of uprising, as dictators usually are, so he expelled all the Jews, not just the Christian ones. Paul meets some of these deported Christians in Corinth. Back in Rome, the only Christians left are people who converted from paganism. For almost ten years, they are the only Christians in Rome.

When Claudius dies in the year 54, the Jewish Christians come back to Rome. The Christian church is now a mix of people who used to be Jewish, and some who used to be pagans. All of them live in the fear of being persecuted by the new Emperor Nero. He comes to hate Christians, and will later blame them for the fire that burned down much of Rome. Like dictators now, the Roman emperors blamed the empire's problems on small minorities. In ancient Rome, it was the Christians. In America today, it is trans people and migrants. Blaming minorities is an old strategy, one that goes all the way back to ancient Rome.

Paul writes his letter to people who are being persecuted for being Christian. He could have told them that all this suffering is pointless, and that the future is bleak. But he doesn't. Instead, he speaks like a father. He says

suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Romans 5:3-4)

Paul argues our character is strengthened by enduring hardship. That with hardship comes perseverance, and through perseverance, comes hope.

That last promise sounds odd. How can hope come to people who are being persecuted, and even killed for their beliefs? Paul reminds them that they are being persecuted because they believe in Christ, a leader who did not embrace violence, but peace. A leader who willingly died on the cross for everyone, for every Roman, pagan, Jew and Greek. He died so we could know that God loves us, and there is nothing we can do to earn or deserve that love. Christ points the way to a world where the power of dictators will be defeated. Their addiction to violence will be shown to be empty, based on fear, not on wisdom or divine favour.

I wish I could say that Paul tells the Roman Christians to stand up to the state, and to resist. He doesn't. Later in his letter he tells the Christians to obey the state (Romans 13). He tells them to be good citizens. God has created the capacity for human government, to keep us from spinning out of control, so we should obey our rulers. Paul was not a rebel. He sincerely believed that Christ would return very soon, within his lifetime, so obeying for now was the best policy.

Today's Christians have stopped waiting for Christ to arrive to solve our problems. Instead, we draw on Jesus' example to stand up for what we believe is right, even when it means resisting the government. Churches have been standing up for the rights of migrants here and in the United States. Churches like ours sponsor refugees who are fleeing governments which persecute them. We are sponsoring a refugee family right now which is living in hiding in Asia. They were persecuted for being Christians. We have faith that the way of peace will prevail. We persevere because we have faith that God's way, the way of love and compassion, is ultimately stronger than the way of fear, greed and violence. As Martin Luther King Jr said , ""Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."

On this father's day, let us recognize that there are many kinds of fathers, and that fatherhood is changing. Let us celebrate the men in our lives who have raised us, loved us, nurtured us, taught us and respected us. Let us be glad we live in a time when fathers can be trusted, and not feared. Let us be suspicious of politicians who claim to be harsh fathers. Fatherhood is in flux. Let us hope that it evolves into a masculine way of loving that is kind and just, fair and strong. Good for children and the entire family. And let us give thanks to our Father in heaven, who reminds us at all times that love should always be our guide. Amen.