LOTS OF BABY-SITTERS—NOT MANY FATHERS

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READ: 1 Corinthians 4: 1-16

Let me start with two warnings.

First: this is the first sermon I have ever preached. And that’s enough said about that.

Second: this is not the sermon I had in mind when I volunteered to preach on Father’s Day. More about that later.

Pope John XXIII (23rd) said, "It is easier for a father to have children than for children to have a real father." I think all you fathers in the congregation, and all you children of fathers, will agree: It is much easier to become a father than to be one.

As we just read, the Apostle Paul told the church at Corinth that “even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers.”

I heard this verse read recently, and immediately Ps 91:11 came to mind:

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

And I thought also of the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:10:

See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

This last verse is often understood to mean that children are protected by guardian angels, and it seems to be corroborated by Hebrews 1:14 which asks:

Aren’t they, [that is, the angels,] ... aren’t they all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?

Inwardly, I felt a compelling sense that God wanted me to preach a sermon about this passage. A picture came to mind—being lifted up by the hands of many angels. You’ve probably seen a similar picture. There’s a vast crowd of thousands and someone has been lifted up above the crowd and is being passed along by the all the uplifted arms and hands over everybody’s head—like a cork bobbing along on the surface of the water. I saw it quite vividly.
When I told Pastor Ken about being prompted by the Spirit to preach from this text about fathers and guardians, I hadn’t yet begun to study the passage. But he agreed I should bring the message on Father’s Day. And as they say, the rest is history.

Surprisingly, however, as I started to study and prepare, the first thing I discovered was that the key word, the one translated as “guardians” in 1 Corinthians 4:14 is not *angelos*, which means “an angel, or a messenger from God.” Instead, the word in the original Greek is *paidagōgos*, and it doesn’t have anything to do with angels.

In modern English we have an equivalent word—“pedagogue,” which means a teacher, especially a dogmatic or pedantic one.

In Paul’s day, *paidagōgos* was the term for slaves whose job it was to take or lead their master’s children to and from school. The literal meaning of “paidagōgos” is child-leader, and by implication, it meant a tutor, an instructor, or a schoolmaster. The ancient pedagogue was responsible to protect the child from evil influences and associates, and to keep him or her safe from physical and moral harm. He was to see to it that the child arrived at school on time and later to bring him or her safely back home. Today we might call that person a nanny or a baby sitter or a child-care worker.

To be sure, all of these duties and responsibilities are also the concerns of a father, but for a baby sitter or a guardian it is only a job and a paycheck at the end of the week. Baby sitters come and go. A child could have dozens of them while growing up.

To make his point Paul exaggerates a little—one could have *ten thousand* guardians. The word he uses is myriad. In contrast, however, a child has only one father.

For that one person, that one father, the care, protection, and nurture of his child are not just his job, but his heartbeat. Mothers, too, fulfill this description. So moms, keep listening, even though today we are talking about fathers. We fathers need and appreciate you by our side.

Paul was referring to his own relationship to the Corinthians so he used the term: “father,” because he considered himself to be their spiritual *father*, not just their guardian. It was he, Paul, who had brought them to life in Christ Jesus.

Henry James has been credited with saying, “Life is that *predicament* which precedes death,” to which Bud Kelland, himself a father and a popular American writer of the 1920’s, 30’s and 40’s, responded, “Certainly nobody owes [his father] a debt of honor or gratitude for getting him into that predicament.”

“But,” Kelland went on to say, “a child *does owe* his father a debt, if dad, having gotten him into this peck of trouble, takes off his coat and buckles down to the job of showing his son [or daughter] how best to crash through it.”
Here, in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul tackles the tough job of being a true father by taking off his coat—maybe we should say he also takes off his gloves—and gets down to the business of showing his children how to grow up, how to become mature.

Do you remember when we were little, perhaps when we were four or five years old? We looked at Dad and we thought “WOW! Daddy can do everything!”

When we started school, maybe even as late as the second grade, we were still pretty impressed. We thought, “Dad knows a lot … a WHOLE lot!”

It wasn’t until the third or fourth grade that we started to realise that Dad didn’t quite know everything. In junior high, we sighed, “Well, naturally, he doesn’t know that either! What’d you expect anyway?”

By the time we were sophomores in high school, our old man was so ignorant we could hardly stand to have him around. And besides, he was so old fashioned, so behind the times, so out of it, so embarrassing!

The word sophomore comes from two Greek words:

- **sophos**, meaning wise or clever, from which we have words like “sophistication” and “philosophy;”
- and **moros**, meaning foolish, dull or idiotic; from which we have the word “moron.”

Well, these Corinthians had become sophomores. In their own minds they were so wise, so clever, so sophisticated, and to them Paul was so ignorant, so foolish, and so old fashioned that they couldn’t stand him anymore. They really would prefer someone else—perhaps Apollos, perhaps Peter and, as if to rub it in Paul’s face, some smugly announced that they would simply prefer to follow Christ. [1 Cor 1:12]

How does a father deal with this kind of immaturity, this kind of arrogance, this kind of rejection? How does he deal with this kind of division over his leadership? We can find out how Paul dealt with it by reading 1 Corinthians.

Now, we obviously don’t have time to read all of 1 Corinthians this morning, so please take the time to read it at home this week. In fact, you might want to read 2 Corinthians as well.

A quick glance at the first four chapters will give us a picture of Paul practicing his fatherly care for the Corinthians:

1. In chapter 1 verses 1-4; Paul points out to them how much potential they have—telling them how thankful he is for them and how grateful he is for the work that God is doing in them.

2. In verse 10; he appeals to them to agree with one another, not to fight among themselves, so that there would be no divisions among them.

3. In chapter 2 verse 3; he confesses his own weakness, “I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.”
4. In verses 4 & 5; he tells them that he doesn’t rely on his own wisdom and strength but he depends on God’s power.

5. At the beginning of chapter 3, he remembers that they are still children, and he deals with them according to what they can understand. He says, “I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it.” [verses 1-2]

6. In verses 5 & 6; he acknowledges that he is unable to do it all by himself. “I planted the seed; Apollos watered.”

7. And in verse 7; he doesn’t take the credit for himself. He says, “and God made it grow.”

8. Here, Paul practices what he later preaches in chapter 13. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

When we get to chapter 4, we learn more about the ups and downs of Paul’s fatherly role. Paul tells us the he is both the humble servant of Jesus Christ (this is the down part, the lowly part), and the trusted steward whom God has empowered with important responsibilities (this is the up part).

The Greek word for "servant" is hyperetas. Originally it designated the rowers in the bottom tier of the Roman galley ships. While it was commonly used to refer to anyone in a subservient position, the focus of the word is on the superiority of the master. Paul’s point was that he is under orders from God and that God is the one who matters in that relationship.

The Greek word for "steward" is oikonomos [oy-kon-om'-os], (we have the word economist) meaning a "ruler of the household." The word was widely used for the managers who had been hired by absentee landlords to run their large estates. It was also used for the title of political officials who were responsible for the treasury or economic affairs of the government. For example, Erastus, who was one of Paul’s companions, was the oikonomos or the Treasurer of the city of Corinth, which after Rome and Alexandria, was probably the third largest and one of the richest cities in the Empire. As the oikonomos or steward, he was entrusted with all its wealth and treasure.

As we have seen the word "servant" reflects a subservient role, but the word "steward," in contrast, emphasizes the high degree of trust and responsibility that Paul had been given in bringing the message of Christ. Paul makes it clear that there should not have been any divisions among them about his leadership.

However, as we saw earlier, these people in Corinth had become sophomores. They no longer had any use for him personally or for his understanding of the gospel. This is a tough job for any father to deal with. Paul has to move the whole Corinthian church from a spirit of division, false pride and rejection of his leadership to a spirit of unity and peace in Christ Jesus.
Even as they question his leadership, he takes it in stride. He doesn’t get overly upset or put off by their rejection or their judgment of his weakness. He knows himself. He knows how weak and imperfect he is. But he also knows that it is God who has put him in charge of these children. He knows he isn’t perfect, and as “foolish” as it may seem, God has made him a steward and has entrusted him with the care and protection of these treasures. In the end, it is only God to whom he must answer. This is why he says it is "a very small matter" that they are judging him. Compared with the judgment and evaluation of Christ, the opinion of the Corinthians doesn’t matter that much.

He does not even judge himself.

   My conscience is clear, [he says, in verse 4] but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

Paul is not aware of any evidence that would portray his ministry negatively so he doesn’t regard the accusations against him as serious charges. However, his not being aware of any problems in his ministry is not proof that none exist. It is only Christ's analysis, not his, not the Corinthians’ that matters.

The conclusion is that his ministry must be accountable to the Lord rather than to those he serves. Neither the disapproval of the Corinthians nor a "clear conscience" on his own part really matters. God's approval is the bottom line for Paul.

That doesn’t mean that Paul doesn’t get angry about all this bad behavior. Paul goes directly to the heart of the matter. Earlier in chapter 1 verse 26, Paul had reminded them of their roots:

   Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

And he reminds them that at one time they had nothing, and that everything they now have was given to them as a gracious gift:

   What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not? [ch 4 v 7]

Paul holds up a mirror to these Corinthians so they can see what they have become. He chides them for their bad behavior—for their false pride:

   Already, you have all you want? Already, you have become rich? You have become kings—and that without us? How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! [verses 7-8]

The words sting! “Some of you have become arrogant,” Paul says!

But his anger does not last for long. Soon his tone changes, and he addresses them as “my beloved children.” He doesn’t want to put them to shame. He only wants to admonish them, to warn them. He speaks to them like a father, and he
wants them to imitate himself. He offers to come to them in a spirit of gentleness. Scolding gives way to tenderness.

I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children. Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I urge you to imitate me. [verses 14-16]

When Paul says, “imitate me,” he isn’t being ego-centric or puffed up. No, this is the guy who called himself “the chief of all sinners,” and he knows that he is not perfect. This is not arrogance. It represents Paul’s very understanding of what it means to be their spiritual father.

We pay coaches to model correct athletic and musical techniques. We never think of them as arrogant when they say, "Do it like me. Do it like I am showing you."

What kind of role models did we have? What kind of role models will we be? What would we find, if you and I were to look back at our own record as fathers—or if we were to look back at our own fathers’ records—or even if we were to go back and look at every father in the Bible, from Genesis through the Book of Revelation? Well, let me tell you. We would find that there are not many fathers worthy of praise ... not many fathers who weren’t failures. But in spite of that, God has chosen fathers, fathers like you and me, father like Paul, to care for these little ones.

Does that make any sense? Listen to what Paul tells the Corinthians:

1. The foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.
2. God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.
3. God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.
4. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.

Spiritual and moral life is not taught in the classroom; it is learned in the laboratory of life. Parents teach their children about marriage and parenting by modeling. Whether this is good or bad, it is how we learn these things. Don’t be discouraged—God knows that—and he is faithful even when we are unfaithful; he overcomes even where we fail; he blesses even when we curse; and he redeems even what we squander and waste.

After a couple has been married for a while, they can look back and understand some of the problems that arose earlier in their marriage. They had problems because the husband, for example, reacted to certain circumstances like his father would have. In other words, he imitated his father, and he expected that his spouse would act just as his mother had. However, the wife was imitating her mother and expecting him to behave as her father would have. Now, it took me a quite a while, but I eventually learned why it didn’t work when I said to Marion, “Mom used to do it like such and so.”
Christian fathers, you and I, we may have many faults; we may make many mistakes; we may be far from perfect, but don’t forget, God has chosen us and he will use us.

"Blessed indeed is the man who hears many gentle voices call him father!" [Lydia M. Child]

Let’s pray:

Heavenly Father, help us trust you. Help us to believe you can and do use whomever you will. Teach us to be your humble servants, not boasting of our own abilities and achievements. In your wisdom, you have made us your stewards and have entrusted us with such wonderful treasures, our children. Help us each day to keep watch over them. Keep us faithful and trustworthy in our duties. Remind us by your Spirit constantly speaking to our spirits that we are accountable to you. Feed us, so we may grow spiritually, and not just with milk, but with the strong meat of your Word. Prepare us to be the kind of fathers that can model our faith to our children and to new believers. Conform us to the image of your Son, our Lord Jesus, so that we will not be ashamed to invite them to imitate us as we imitate Him. Amen.