

BECOMING EFFECTIVE FATHERS

Earlier this year I was asked to give a conference at a men's retreat that was sponsored by Kepha, the dynamic father-son organization (www.kepharocks.org). That presentation developed ideas about the vocation of husbands using as a starting point chapter 5:21-33 from St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians and the first three chapters of Genesis. This conference is intended to compliment that presentation. The topic I have chosen is *Becoming Effective Fathers*. At first blush this selection may seem unnecessarily narrow for a mixed audience of moms and dads, because it neglects the awesome dignity and vocation of women as mothers.

The two vocations of fatherhood and motherhood are, of course, complimentary since both roles are intended by God to be conduits of life – both biological and spiritual life. Of these the spiritual dimension of parenting is a vital part of the destiny of all men and women. Only some men and women are called to be biological fathers and mothers.

Nevertheless, I have limited my focus to fatherhood for three reasons. First, our distorted culture is experiencing a grave crisis of fatherhood. Secondly, the constraints of my allotted time are inadequate to discuss both fatherhood and motherhood. Lastly, I am convinced that the ladies in attendance can easily make the necessary adjustments to apply the principles we will examine to their unique personal situations.

The biblical springboard for this topic is a familiar passage from St. Matthew's Gospel. As some of you know I have spent this summer in a major revision of my commentary on Matthew. Our recent Kepha mission to Saltillo, Mexico offered many hours for reading and reflection. I am grateful to the dads and boys for patiently granting me the quiet time for study and meditation. This particular presentation came together while we were in Mexico. It came about as a surprise to me because prior to the trip I was developing a very different approach to the topic of fatherhood. It certainly was another reminder to me that God is in control.

The specific launching text is Matthew 17:14-23 - the healing of a boy. Let's examine its setting in the St. Matthew's Gospel. After the intense experience that Peter, James and John had with Jesus during the transfiguration and Jesus' instruction to the apostles concerning Elijah and John the Baptist, the Lord returned to the plain where he continued his habitual task of giving himself to the needs of the crowds. St. Matthew strategically places the incident of this healing after those two events, but before Jesus goes to Jerusalem to be crucified.

As the story unfolds a man approached Jesus and knelt before him in an attitude of self-surrender. His first two words were *Kyrie eleison* – “Lord, have mercy.” This marvelous act of trust and devotion is found in every Christian liturgical tradition going back to the apostles – often in the original Greek – as the prayer of the whole family of God. In our text the distraught father looked up at Jesus and said, *Kyrie eleison* – “Lord, have mercy... for he suffers terribly” (17:15).

St. Matthew interjected a medical diagnosis of his time. The Greek text tells us the boy was “moon struck,” a common explanation of that day for epilepsy. These convulsions endangered the boy’s life by making him often fall into fire and water. These polar elements, fire and water, form an apt biblical symbolism for the totality of the dangers from which God promised to deliver his people. For example, the Lord said in Isaiah: “Fear not for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the *waters* I will be with you; and through the *rivers*, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through *fire* you shall not be burned, and the *flame* shall not consume you” (Is 43:1-2).

Today our sons and daughters face a menacing peril from two far more dangerous elements. They are the turbulent waters of our pernicious pagan culture, which can permeate their souls the way water saturates a towel, and the everlasting fire of hell.

The anxious awareness that the boy could lose his life impelled the father to fall at the feet of Mercy, as he sought safety in the Savior of the world. Jesus could take into himself the grief of this father because he is the man of sorrows. Our experience with the sins of our past and the perversions that surrounds us should similarly alarm dads to the urgent need to ward off danger from their sons and daughters. We, too, should beg Jesus, *Kyrie, eleison*.

At this juncture the narrative takes an unexpected detour. The father said, “I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him” (17:16). This is surprising. Earlier St. Matthew reported that Jesus sent the twelve to the lost sheep of Israel with the instruction: “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons” (10:8). St. Mark added information about the result of their mission: “They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them” (Mk 6:13). Therefore the exposure of the disciples’ inability to heal the boy occasioned a significant lesson for the disciples... and for us. The disciples were not able to communicate divine healing because, as we shall see, they had reverted to their old earthly selves.

Here we can readily make a comparison with Gehazi, Elisha’s disciple. Gehazi tried to bring a dead child back to life by laying a sacred staff on the boy’s face. He failed. Mere externals, whether they are rituals or commands, always prove as useless in healing as they do in building holiness. The boy was cured when Elisha extended his whole being over the dead body, “putting his mouth upon his mouth, eyes upon his eyes, and hands upon his hands” (2 Kgs 4:31-35). Words and actions only have the power that radiates from the life that is within us.

The disciples, like all human fathers, were chosen in spite of their inherent weaknesses and sinfulness to become God’s collaborators in communicating life. However, something was radically wrong beyond the disciples’ inability to cure as they did before. Jesus will use the father’s plea for his son to teach the disciples an important lesson.

Jesus’ stinging outburst made it evident that he intended this lesson to have a broad application, namely, to us also.

“O faithless and perverse generation,
how long am I to be with you?
How long am I to bear with you” (17:17)?

This language would immediately seize the disciples’ attention because it is very similar to Moses’ castigation of his generation in Deuteronomy 32.

Beginning with Jesus’ impassioned “O” the focus dramatically shifted from the father’s plea to the inner life of the disciples. Once again Jesus will try to penetrate their denseness with a lesson they will not fully understand until Good Friday and perhaps even Pentecost. This is why they – and we also – are aptly called *da’ ciples*.

Jesus’ lesson began when he commanded in the plural: “Bring him here to me” (17:17). In other words, it is your job to bring the needy to *me*. They, like you, need *my* mercy. It is *my* job to heal. Tragically, the disciples made no attempt to bring the boy to Jesus, even after their attempt at healing failed. Let’s make a comparison that resonates with parents. What would you think, for example, of a pediatrician who sent away a child without any recommendation to a specialist who had a life threatening heart or neurological disorder?

Jesus probed and exposed the vanity of his inner circle. They relied on themselves. They said the words, but they came from their self-confident pride not from surrendering confidence in their Lord. They failed in faith’s most fundamental requirement – everything must be deposited at the Lord’s feet. Jesus would repeat this important lesson during his Farewell Discourse on Holy Thursday: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5).

It is important to reflect that we are fathers and disciples because God has mercy on the lowly, not because we were so wonderful and gifted. Isn’t it true, dads that we often recognize in our wives a depth of self-sacrifice and holiness that we lack? Don’t we also recognize that our children are far more advanced in the things that truly matter than we were at their ages? Personally, I can answer both questions in the affirmative. That consideration should stir in us a strong devotion to St. Joseph, the head of a family that included his spouse, the Blessed Mother of God, and his foster son Jesus, the eternal begotten Son of the Father. We need to pray: *Kyrie, eleison*.

St. Matthew’s narrative now takes another twist. In rapid succession three verbs highlight that Jesus commanded the entire situation. He “*rebuked,*” the “*demon came out,*” and the boy was *cured* instantly” (17:18). The presence of the demon is another surprise in the text. Only Jesus, Wisdom Incarnate, can unmask the presence of the Evil One. The father’s desperation and the disciples play-acting as savior were fruitless to affect a cure. The father recognized that reality, but the apostles had forgotten it. Only Jesus can drive out the power of darkness. This is why we must pray for our children: *Kyrie, eleison*.

There are two important corollaries at the end of this narrative. Both lend further insight into our topic. After berating the disciples publically, Jesus privately continued his

instruction. They inquired why they couldn't cure the boy. Jesus replied, "Because of your little faith" (17:20).

Faith is not a *thing* one possesses like an idea or car. Faith is a transforming relationship that gives us a whole new way of thinking and acting. Thus, St. Paul frames the entire Letter to the Romans with the "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:6; 16:26). When our faith is "little" it is dysfunctional because it relies for healing, guiding, forming, salvation and justification in places other than on Jesus Christ. In this regard it is critical to recognize that we are not called to *imitate* Christ, but to *become* Christ by allowing Jesus to live and operate in and through us. Thus St. Paul affirms: "It is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 3:20). This recreation into Christ is the awesome work of the Holy Spirit.

In the second corollary Jesus informed the disciples: "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him." (Mt 17:22-23). After the earlier lesson to reshape the disciples' heart, Jesus introduced the cross. Two points are in order here. First, there is a fundamental difference between the cross in Jesus' life and the cross we are asked to bear. This is true even if we experienced the blessing of martyrdom. We are called to die to self, which is an interior crucifixion. It is only through this death process that we can be fully reborn in Christ. Anyone who thinks that is not a struggle to the death hasn't engaged the battle.

Here we discover a curious phenomenon. Males take pride in being physically fearless, yet when it comes to the great interior battle for souls they are often wimps. It is much easier, for example, to expend ones life in achievements, work and sports than it is to embrace the unselfishness required to be an effective father. We need to pray: *Kyrie, eleison.*

Secondly, like the hatred of Joseph's brothers and the hatred Cain had for Abel, Jesus will be hated and killed precisely because he demonstrated what it meant to be fully human. For those who won't welcome Jesus, goodness becomes the dagger of judgment pointing at their evil hearts. It fills them with hatred. Authentic Christians are always counter-cultural and will always be hated by the world. When Jesus sent the twelve on their first mission he warned them: "You will be hated by all for my name's sake" (Mt 10:22). We must be prepared to endure this reality, and we must prepare our children to suffer it, but never from a position of self-confidence, superiority or arrogance.

There is another lesson that St. Matthew recorded that dovetails perfectly into our topic of consideration. Specifically, I am referencing to the identification of those who are closest to the Heart of Jesus because of their dispositions and the pattern of their lives. The specific passage of this focus occurs in the first five verses of chapter 18. It refers to the "little ones."

Self-aggrandizement and self-importance is a poison that is difficult to extract from our system. That the disciples did not absorb the lesson we just considered is revealed when these ambitious men ask Jesus: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (18:1)?

Perhaps they were feeling insecure because in the immediately preceding episode Jesus miraculously provided a silver coin from the mouth of a fish to pay the temple tax for himself and Peter (17:24-27). What we observe in their inquiry is jealousy and jockeying for position.

In a marvelous use of paradox Jesus reversed the definition of “great” and “small” upsetting their comfortable understanding that was spawned by ego and the values of the world. Jesus rejected self-reliance and self-acclaim, but exalted as “great” the utter dependency of children, the “little ones”.

To fully understand Jesus’ lesson on spiritual childhood, which is a lesson about humility, we should recognize that in the first century children were of no importance. They had neither rights nor social standing in the eyes of the world. In the Greek language the same word, *pais*, can be translated either as “child” or “servant”. The boy in this brief narrative would be standing in the back of the group as a non-entity so as not to distract from the important activity of adults. They would be standing with their backs to him, which is indicative of the general disdain of children.

Jesus called the boy with words that remarkably parallel the exact words Jesus used to call the apostles. This choice of words was a reminder to the disciples that they, too, were unimportant men upon whom the great ones of the world and even their own religious leaders had turned their backs.

The boy heard Jesus’ call. He immediately came to Jesus and allowed himself to be placed “in the midst of them” (18:2). The text gives no indication of hesitancy, resistance, self-consciousness or embarrassment. Jesus called. That was all that mattered. Then Jesus made a statement that surely startled his disciples when he solemnly declared: “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (18:3). In other words, “unless you change your present way of acting and respond to my call like this boy, you won’t even enter heaven. So forget about who’s the greatest.”

The way of spiritual childhood is the way of surrender, giving up the fantasy of control. Submission is the straight road to the heaven, but by way of the cross. The disciples were concerned about their status in kingdom of heaven instead of focusing on servicing its members. All projects of self-promotion in Jesus’ kingdom are valueless and must be abandoned. All the trappings of worldly success are stripped away at death. Why not surrender them now?

In this little anecdote we discover a reinforcement of the previous lesson. As dads and disciples we, too, are called to abandon any attitude of self-importance so we can be the spiritual shepherds in our families – not impatient, self-centered, harsh, and inflexible tyrants who fail to bring our sons and daughters to Jesus, the great physician of souls. It is difficult to abandon the encumbering habits of adults that chain us to worldly standards and selfishness. Nevertheless, Jesus says we must “*become* like children” (18:3). The Greek word *gignomai* can be rendered “to become” or “to be born”. These two ideas

converge in this passage to convey the depth of the transformation necessary when Jesus said, “Unless you become like children.” So we must pray, *Kyrie, eleison*.

Jesus did in fact answer the disciples’ initial self-serving question. “Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (18:4). Humility is based on truth. Humility acknowledges the reality of our littleness and helplessness before God. The spiritual child claims no special rights for himself. He makes no personal demands from others. He depends solely on God. It is this attitude and this attitude alone that allows God to work miracles through his disciples. When the apostles embrace this spirit, Jesus will again work miracles through them as is evidenced in Acts. When dads embrace this attitude God works the miracles through them that transform their sons and daughters.

The great Spanish mystic and director of souls, St. John of the Cross wrote: “God falls in love with the soul not because his eyes are attracted to her greatness, but to the greatness of her humility.” Consider our Blessed Mother. Did she boast, “Look at me, I’m sinless,”¹ or “I’m the mother of God.”² No! She recognized that her freedom from all sin was due to God’s preventative salvation and the conception of Jesus was due to God’s mercy. Her whole orientation is directed toward God first, and others second, but never on herself. “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon the lowliness of his slave girl. He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is His name” (Lk 1:47-48).

Growth in the spiritual life takes time, not because grace is lacking or works slowly, but because we cling to attachments and attitudes that diminish God’s influence. St. Matthew’s Gospel provides a marvelous example of Jesus patience in repeating the same lesson to the apostles over and over again. The lesson of humility figured prominently in the Sermon on the Mount. In the beatitudes he revealed the heart of his Father and exposed his own heart. He declared that “the poor in spirit,” “the meek,” “those who hunger and thirst for justice,” “the merciful,” “the pure of heart,” “the peacemakers,” and “those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,” are blessed (5:3-12). He taught his disciples that almsgiving (6:1-4), prayer (6:5-6) and fasting (6:16-18) is not about calling attention to oneself.

He told his followers: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal” (6:19). Then he gave them a life altering principle: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (6:21). Jesus tutored his disciples to be urgent and persistent in prayer. Prayer by its very nature is an acknowledgment of our helplessness and a cry to God for help (7:7-11).

¹ The angel’s greeting, “Hail, full of grace” (Lk 1:28) provides a biblical support for Mary’s freedom from sin. The Greek word, *kecharitoméne*, which is a perfect passive participle means to be completely full of grace intensively and extensively.

² Lk 1:43 proclaims that Mary is the Mother of God.

Jesus thanked his Father because he revealed the secrets of his heart and true wisdom to “children” and not to the so-called “wise” of this world (11:25). Then Jesus declared: “Learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart” (11:29).

In chapter 14 St. Matthew gave a lesson on humility to Simon, whom he will rename *kepha* in Aramaic – Rock. Peter walked on water as long as he was focused on Jesus, but once he focused on Simon he sank like a rock (14:22-23). Subsequently, after he has renamed Simon and named him his prime minister (Mt 16:13-29), Jesus immediately give Peter another lesson on humility.

When Jesus informed the apostles “that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed” (16:21). Peter presumed to teach Jesus implying that *he* knew best and would prevent this from ever happening. It was as if Peter was placing himself between Jesus and Jerusalem. This merited the admonition, “Get behind me, Satan” (16:23)! These words are reminiscent of the command that routed the devil during Jesus’ temptation in the desert (4:10). Simon, will indeed become *Kepha*, the Rock, but only through his humbling betrayal and Jesus’ merciful forgiveness. It was Peter’s self-confident pride that led him to neglect prayer and rely on himself with disastrous results. Beware, because there is an element of Peter in all of us. We need to pray: *Kyrie, eleison*.

Jesus also gave the disciples and all Christians another powerful lesson in humility in chapter 15:21-28 of Matthew’s gospel. A pagan, a Canaanite woman, a non-Jew, a *goy*, screams out to Jesus with the urgent plea, *Kyrie, eleison* – “Lord, have mercy on me”, then adds, “my daughter is severely possessed by a demon” (15:22). Jesus responded with ominous silence!

When the apostles asked Jesus to send her away because she kept crying after them, he replied impersonally: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). When she knelt before Jesus pleading, “Lord, help me” (15:25), Jesus answered in words that seem very degrading, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (15:26). The Greek word, *kunarion*, rendered in our text as “dogs,” refers to little house dogs. How would you feel if someone implied that your little girl was a worthless pagan dog?

However, notice the remarkable response of this amazingly humble woman. She agreed with Jesus’ assessment without defensiveness while continuing her plea. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table” (15:27). She fully accepted the truth. She and her daughter were little dogs in relationship to the creator of heaven and earth. She would gladly accept a role for herself and her daughter as house pets in the palace of the King of Kings. She would be delighted if they could eat the crumbs from his table.

When I reflect on the response of this surprising woman I think of our little dog, Georgia. Georgia came to us unexpectedly one day with her head down and her tail wagging. She

was so docile and humble that she captured every heart in the family. So it was with Jesus.

The exclamation “O” only occurs five times in all four Gospels. They are always from the mouth of Jesus. In one instance Jesus gives a mild rebuke to the disciples on the way to Emmaus: “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe” (Lk 14:25). On three other occasions they punctuate strong condemnations (Mt 17:17; Mk 9:19; Lk 9:41). Finally, in the case of the Canaanite women “O” is exclusively used to introduce Jesus’ approval. “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire” (15:28). Two thousand years later we remember her as the woman of great faith and admirable humility.

Further insight is gained by reflecting on Jesus’ use of the word, “woman”. Jesus twice identified his own mother as “woman,” first at Cana when he begins his formal assault on the kingdom of Satan, and finally on Calvary where he completed his victory. By so doing he identified his mother with the “woman” of Genesis 3:15 and Revelation 12:1-2, 4-5,17 whose seed will crush the serpent’s head. Jesus’ address of the Canaanite mother as “woman” connected her with Mary, the prophecy of Genesis and the revelation of the Apocalypse. This may seem surprising until one recalls another familiar incident.

Matthew reported that someone told Jesus, “‘Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, asking to speak with you.’ But he said in reply to the one who told him, ‘Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother’” (Mt 12:47-50). The humble surrender of this pagan woman to the “obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5; 16:26) incorporated her into Jesus’ covenant family. She was no longer a dog eating the scraps from his table.

The example of the apostles teaches us that spiritual growth is a process – often a painful process. Even during the Last Supper the apostles were arguing which of them was the greatest (Lk 22:24-30). We must learn to be patient with ourselves and completely dependent of God’s grace. This is also a vital posture to have with our children. Yes, we must instruct and, on occasion, admonish and correct. However, Jesus is the Master, the only one who can work the needed miracles in their lives. We must always bring them to the Divine Healer.

Jesus lived all the lessons he gave. He provided his final example of humility when he washed the feet of the Apostles on Holy Thursday, and in the degradation of Good Friday. After washing his apostle’s feet Jesus said, “I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” (Jn 14:15). Herein lies another vital lesson for dads. We can only be effective spiritual leaders in our families to the degree that we exemplify in our lives what we teach with our lips. We must embrace the example of Jesus and serve those we are called to lead. We cannot give what we don’t have. No one can. The key is recognizing our helplessness, accepting that we, too, are “little dogs” totally dependent on the Master. This is the process spoken by John the Baptist, we must become less and less, so Jesus can become more and more in us.

Speaking recently (CAN/CWNews July 28, 2004) on a nationwide radio program Cardinal Juan Louis Cipriani of Lima, Peru asserted, “the great enemy of the Church is the weak priest, who lacks fervor.” Isn’t it equally true that the greatest danger to the family is the weak father, who lacks fervor? He calls on his priests to proclaim the truth boldly, which they can only accomplish if they live it boldly. We dads are the priests in our families. We, too, are called to proclaim the truth by word and example. The example is the hard part. Jesus is the one, the only one, who can make up for our deficiencies if we will humbly fall at his feet. The Kepha morning prayers conclude with the Prayer of St. Francis. The second half of that beautiful prayer focuses on humility, the forgetfulness of self by focusing on others.

*O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Let our prayer for ourselves and for our children be: *Kyrie, eleison.*

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