

HE CALLED GOD FATHER

Sermon, June 21, 2020

Father's Day

Text: Luke 11:1-4

A story I told on Father's Days past begins with nineteenth century English poet Percy Shelley, who was one of the major English Romantic poets and widely considered by some to be among the finest lyric and epic poets in the English language. (*Now I know from past experience when I start talking about poetry, some eyes may begin to glaze over. Please bear with me!*) Throughout his brief life (*he drowned a few days before his 30th birthday*), Percy Shelley lived what many would consider a rather hedonistic lifestyle, to put it politely. He rebelled against what he perceived to be the overly restrictive, judgmental mores of Christian religion and English politics. He was a devout atheist (*which is not an oxymoron, by the way ... it takes a lot of faith to be a consistent atheist, but that's another sermon*). One of Shelley's first writings was a tract published in 1811 during his studies at Oxford, and led to his expulsion from that university ... the tract was entitled "*The Necessity of Atheism.*"

Percy Shelley was greatly influenced by his acquaintance with a British philosopher by the name of William Godwin. Who was William Godwin? For seven years, William Godwin was a minister, a clergyman in the Church of England. By 1785, however, he had rejected his faith and had become a rather militant atheist. In 1793 he wrote his best-known work, *The Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (*I'm sure many of you have read it ... a real page turner. Not.*) in which he expressed contempt for restrictions placed on one person by another or by a government or by a religion. In short, Godwin believed a man could perfect himself if state and religion would just leave him alone.

Another result of the acquaintance between the two was that then 22-year-old Percy took a rather intense interest in William Godwin's teen daughter, Mary. Mary's mother had died shortly after she was born, and it seems that Dad Godwin ... you know, the one who believed man could be perfect if religion and state would just leave him alone ... was, to put it mildly, hardly a perfect father. In the year 1814, Percy Shelley left his wife Harriet (*and their two children*) behind in England and "toured" Europe with William Godwin's daughter ... Mary was the ripe old age of *fifteen* at the time. Two years after this so-called "romantic" poet left his wife and kids at home and toured Europe with the teeny bopper daughter of his esteemed and "self-perfected" mentor, Percy Shelley's wife killed herself. Harriet Shelly's body was recovered from a lake in London. The "grieving widower" Percy then apparently abandoned his kids and married Mary Godwin very shortly thereafter ... Mary Godwin was now eighteen years of age.

At the age of twenty, Mary Godwin Shelley wrote her first novel; as some of you know, that novel was entitled *Frankenstein*. The work was an immediate critical and popular success, a remarkable accomplishment for a twenty-year-old ... a twenty-year-old whose dark life experiences made her much older than her years. Do you know what motivated her work? According to some literary scholars, it was so much more than just a monster story.¹ It seems that teeny-bopper Mary was initially enamored and even infatuated with Percy Shelley's hedonistic lifestyle, and she went on to become an enthusiastic participant in his sexual libertinism and the very loose living of their circle of friends and acquaintances. (*This a family-friendly church service, so I'm not going into the details; but a recent New Yorker article was most disturbing to read .. I'll footnote it in the sermon manuscript which will be available next week and on line* ²) But eventually, Mary became increasingly disenchanted, disillusioned and even disgusted by it all, especially when she saw the consequences of all this amoral behavior. She saw the wreckage wrought in the lives of those affected ... the unhappiness, the depression, the suicides, the unwanted and neglected children. Most of all, Mary Shelly was struck by the stark disparity between the casual and irresponsible and lighthearted way these people could carry on without ANY consideration to the misery and the damage and the hurt and pain and sadness they caused others and themselves, *and* without any consideration to the lives such careless living brought into the world. She embodied this disparity in Dr. Frankenstein's monster. As the monster himself puts it to the mad doctor: "*How dare you sport with life?*"

Mary Shelley's fictional Dr. Frankenstein brought life into this world to satisfy *his* ego needs, *his* warped and even maniacal drives ... but in doing so he gave little thought to the needs and necessities of the very real life he was creating. This newly-created being was given no foundation, no stability, no home, no moral instruction, no devotion of a father or mother, no family structure, no religious training, no roots, no goals in life, no purpose ... nothing! The polemic of Mary Shelley's novel is that to sport with life in this manner is not only selfish and shortsighted, it is ultimately cruel for all involved, and the consequences can be incredibly destructive ... in the

¹ For a more detailed account, see *Monsters from the Id*, E. Michael Jones, chapter 3: "Frankenstein" pp. 66-98, Spence Publishing, Dallas, TX c. 2000. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1047811.Monsters_From_The_Id

² <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/12/the-strange-and-twisted-life-of-frankenstein>

end, the life Dr. Frankenstein irresponsibly sired and created eventually destroyed everyone and everything Dr. Frankenstein loved and cared for. The indirect implication is that creating life, *siring* life, entails devoted, dedicated, selfless, *responsibility*, which includes abiding by and providing a governing moral order and example.

Also on Father's Days past I told another story, a story of another motherless daughter who lived near the turn of the twentieth century, Sonora Louise Smart Dodd of Spokane, Washington. In the year 1909, after listening to a church sermon on Mother's Day, Sonora Louise Smart Dodd decided right then and there that there should be a Father's Day. Her father, William Jackson Smart, a Civil War veteran, was widowed when his wife died in childbirth with their sixth child. For the next twenty-one years, Mr. Smart raised the newborn and his other five children by himself as a single parent on a rural farm in eastern Washington; he never remarried. It was after that sixth child became an adult that Mrs. Dodd realized the extent of the devoted selflessness and patient graciousness displayed by her father in the raising of his children and in providing stability and a moral example and a home for them. Unlike Dr. Frankenstein, William Jackson Smart knew that creating life, *siring* life, entailed devoted, dedicated, selfless, gracious **responsibility**, no matter what life's circumstances might bring his way! Mrs. Dodd drew up a petition recommending adoption of a national Father's Day, the Spokane Ministerial Association and the local Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) strongly supported it, and Spokane celebrated the first Father's Day on June 19, 1910. The original date chosen by Mrs. Dodd was her father's birthday, June 5; however, the Spokane council couldn't get the resolution through the required first reading and subsequent vote until the third Sunday in June. The idea caught on across the country, and in 1924 President Calvin Coolidge helped promote a national Father's Day. In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed a presidential proclamation officially declaring the third Sunday of June as Father's Day, and in 1972, President Richard Nixon established it as a permanent national observance. So, today we honor men like the appropriately named Mr. Smart, a man who certainly cut the mustard as a father. This day is dedicated to honoring fathers ... but really all people ... who know that creating life, *siring* life, entails dedicated, selfless, gracious and loving responsibility and nurture.

Jesus called God "Father." He called on God as Father, He described God as a Father. The God He called Father is not just some egotistic, maniacal Creator who spun a life-filled creation into being and left it on its own to find its own way in life, but He is a *father* ... One who knows that *siring* life involves responsibility for the lives He creates, conscientious responsibility which works to provide stability, guidance, direction, moral standards, nurture and sacrificial love for His children. The God Jesus called Father is a God who displays the gracious patience, devoted selflessness and loving attention of a compassionate Father who is **involved** with His progeny, a father who delights in His offspring. His children are not seen as a nuisance, a bother, a curse, little monsters on the loose, a ball and chain. They are recipients of His love, mercy, grace and guidance.

In fact, every single time Jesus prayed to God in the Gospels, He called God FATHER. Every time, that is, except one ... and that was when He was on the cross, and cried out, "My God, My God." And even more to the point, when His disciples asked Him, "Lord, how should we pray?" He answered, "Say, **Our Father** ..." God has only one begotten Child, but through His only-begotten son Jesus Christ, He gives us the right to be called sons and daughters of the living Heavenly Father. In Jesus Christ we become children of God via adoption through Him. And God *wants* sons and daughters, as a Father, He delights in them. AND He delights in providing goals and purpose and moral structure and setting a loving example of what life could be and how life should be lived. I would also add that God wants sons and daughters, not slaves. God does desire our faithful service; however, God doesn't want slaves who are compelled by fear to serve ... He wants sons, He wants daughters, children of faith who *delight* in serving Him, out of gratitude and joy and love, and who go on to discover in that gratitude-motivated service the deepest joy life has to offer.

Now let us stand as we affirm our faith, using the words of the Heidelberg Catechism (*questions 118-120*):

WHY HAS CHRIST COMMANDED US TO ADDRESS GOD: "OUR FATHER"? THAT AT THE VERY BEGINNING OF OUR PRAYER HE MAY AWAKEN IN US THE CHILDLIKE REVERENCE AND TRUST TOWARD GOD WHICH SHOULD BE THE MOTIVATION OF OUR PRAYER, WHICH IS THAT GOD HAS BECOME OUR FATHER THROUGH CHRIST AND WILL MUCH LESS DENY US WHAT WE ASK HIM IN FAITH THAN OUR HUMAN FATHERS WILL REFUSE US EARTHLY THINGS.

WHAT HAS GOD COMMANDED US TO ASK OF HIM? ALL THINGS NECESSARY FOR SOUL AND BODY WHICH CHRIST THE LORD HAS INCLUDED IN THE PRAYER WHICH HE HIMSELF TAUGHT US.

WHAT IS THE LORD'S PRAYER? "OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY NAME. THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN. GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD; AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS, AS WE FORGIVE OUR DEBTORS; AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION, BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL, FOR THINE IS THE KINGDOM AND THE POWER AND THE GLORY FOREVER, AMEN."