

Denice K. Leslie
June 18, 2006 Father's Day
Second Sunday After Pentecost

“This I Believe”

Today is Father's Day and Confirmation Sunday. Today we honor fathers: Father's who are life-giving, and life providing, father's who are no longer living, and those in our lives who have been as fathers to us in the absence of a father or in place of a father who has failed us.

Likewise, we honor our youth who are making their confession of faith this day. One young lady comes to be baptized—to receive the water and laying on of hands that signifies for us the welcoming embrace of God into the family of the Church universal—as she makes her public declaration to be a follower of Jesus.

The other young people come to confirm the baptismal vows taken on their behalf as infants or small children, having been nurtured in the faith by the example of you who are their parents and by the example of you, their church family—as they too make a public declaration to be a follower of Jesus.

Through the loving, life giving relationships of mothers and fathers, church members and friends, our young people have come to know Jesus and to know and feel the love of God.

---Not just know in their heads, but in their hearts---and now they are ready to say to you and to the world, “This I believe.”

Do you know what you believe? As a follower of Jesus, could you write down or give voice to what you know—what you believe about God?

This morning as we honor these young people and as we honor fathers I want to share with you an essay written by a high school student titled “*This I Believe.*”

“I believe in God. Not that cosmic, intangible spirit-in-the-sky that Mama told me (about) as a little boy-- (as in) "always was and always will be.”

But the God who embraced me when Daddy disappeared from our lives, (and) from my life at age four, the night police led him away from our front door, down the stairs in handcuffs.

The God who warmed me when we could see our breath inside our freezing apartment,

where the gas was disconnected in the dead of winter.

The God who held my hand when I witnessed boys in my 'hood swallowed (up) by the elements, by death and by hopelessness;---
---(The God) who claimed me when I felt like "no-man's son," amid the absence of any man to wrap his arms around me and tell me, "everything's going to be okay," to speak proudly of me, to call me son.

I believe in God, God the Father, embodied in his Son Jesus Christ. The God who allowed me to feel his presence whether by the warmth that filled my belly like hot chocolate on a cold afternoon,

----or--- *that voice*, whenever I found myself in the tempest of life's storms, telling me (even when I was told I was "nothing") that I was something, that I was his, and that even amid the desertion of the man who gave me his name and DNA and little else, I might find in him sustenance.

I always envied boys I saw walking hand-in-hand with their fathers. I thirsted for the conversations fathers and sons have about the birds and the bees, or about nothing at all, simply feeling his breath, heartbeat, and presence.

As a boy, I used to sit on the front porch watching the cars roll by; imagining that one day one would park and the man getting out would be my daddy. But it never happened.

When I was 16, I could find no tears that California winter's evening in January (of) 2004 as I stood, finally, face to face with my father, lying cold in a casket, his eyes sealed, his heart no longer beating, his breath forever stilled. Killed in a car accident, he died drunk, leaving me hobbled by the sorrow of years of fatherlessness.

By then, it had been years since Mama had summoned the police to our apartment that night, fearing that daddy might hurt her or hit her again. Finally, his alcoholism consumed what good there was of him until it swallowed him whole.

It wasn't until many years later, standing over my father's grave for a long overdue conversation, that my tears flowed. I told him about the man I had become. I told him about how much I wished he had been in my life. And I realized fully that in his absence, I had found

another. Or that He, God, the Father had found me.”

Or that He, God the Father, had found me. “I once was lost but now am found...” the hymn line in Amazing Grace tells us. Is there anything in this world more desolate than a father-less child?

This child had no father until he found God. How did he find God? We don’t know. But someone, some where must have taken time to share God’s love with him. Was that person a man?

Was that man someone willing to be in a loving, faith mentoring relationship with him? Over enough time that he was able to experience the presence of God eclipsing the sorrow of the father who deserted him?

When Jesus prays he tells us to say, “Our Father, who art in heaven.”

The word we translate as father is actually the word Abba, which means Daddy: that very personal, intimate word we reserve for our fathers in that close and loving relationship we have with them as their children.

It is an expression of deep and abiding trust, love and dependence. There’s a sense of peaceful assurance that as long as Daddy is there all is right with the world.

This is what Jesus wants us to know about God because this is the relationship God desires to have with each and every one of us.

And so Jesus teaches us to rely on God with the same filial love and trust we have for our earthly fathers and mothers. Because we are God’s children.

This is especially important when our earthly fathers or mothers fail us. It’s important because when human beings fail us we know that God will not fail us.

This is what Dang Vang came to know through his faith in God. Although “hobbled” by years of fatherlessness, he came to know through the good news of Jesus Christ that he is some body.

That he is worthy and worthwhile, that he is loved and loveable, that he can love in return. The love of God as father saved this young man from a life of resentment, violence, crime, drugs and death.

What do you believe? I believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only power in the universe that can save lives—that can change lives—that can renew, restore, and transform lives.

I believe that in our society, men who show and share the strength of God’s love have a power in their hands that is superior to the power of splitting atoms because it can do what no other power can: make people whole, make systems whole, and make the world whole.

I believe that every child needs a father—whether by biology, by friendship or adoption. Every child needs a male role model of what it means to be a man who loves, nurtures and cares and provide for others, and for our world.

I believe that every man who discovers the power of God’s love through Jesus Christ, will know a sense of peace within himself that is not the peace that is about an absence of all conflict, or an end of all problems in life--

—but a sense of peace in the midst of real, every day life, that is a quiet and inner assurance of God’s love for them and for the world... because they have chosen not to be conformed to this world but transformed by the renewing of their minds and hearts by the love of God as they seek to do God’s will.

I believe that men who permit themselves to be in open, trusting and loving relationship with God and others are men of strong character and serve as role models not only for sons and daughters and young people everywhere, but for all of us.

And so on this Father’s Day, I give thanks for the love and example of faithing fathers. And on this confirmation day, I give thanks for young people who are willing to step forward and declare “this I believe” through their decision to follow Jesus. Together, let us rejoice and say, “Thanks be to God!” Amen.