

A Father to the Fatherless

Psalm 68:4-6; Luke 14:25-34

When I was an adolescent, we bought a new house in Waterloo on Menno St. We also bought the car that had belonged to the previous owners – an early 1980s model, orangey-brown AMC Concord station wagon that we nick-named the Scheissmobile. The Scheissmobile was not only named thus because of its gross colour, but because of a host of other characteristics. The ceiling lining (of the same colour) billowed down so much that my mom had to use safety pins to pin it up. There was a hole in the floor of passenger side, so my dad stuffed insulation in it so mom wouldn't catch a draft. And one of the seatbelts ripped, so mom had to sew it back together. Safety first!

Our dad had a penchant for ugly cars. And it had nothing to do with what we could or couldn't afford. Dad would say that he wanted people to know it was him driving down the street and that ugly cars were easier to spot in the parking lot. Until I was old enough to appreciate the humour of these cars, I was mortified to be seen in them.

I went to a middle school with very rich kids whose parents drove BMWs and Mercedes. I usually walked to school, but one day I was running late, so my dad offered to drive me. I was in grade 8 – painfully self-conscious and sporting a bad attitude. When we were about a block from the school, I asked my dad to drop me off. He asked me why he couldn't drive me up to the school and I said that I was embarrassed about our crappy car. So, he not only drove up to the school, he drove onto the school yard and dropped me off right outside of my portable, leaving tire tracks in the grass. This kind of thing was typical of his parenting – he taught me that embracing one's weirdness and overcoming embarrassment was a sign of good character. I have to say I agree now even though I didn't appreciate it then.

I lost my dad in 2010 to cancer, 36 hours after he managed to get up on stage and perform one last time with his bluegrass band, Five on the Floor. I miss him a lot. He was hilarious, warm, a dynamic theologian and teacher, a man of deep faith and a great dad. I wanted to talk about him a bit because it's Father's Day, so

thanks for indulging me. I know many of you are thinking of your lost fathers today too.

A number of years ago, my whole family was gathered at my parents' place. I have two brothers who are both married with kids and I am lucky to say that we are a close family and enjoy one another's company tremendously. I would also say that we covet our time together, sometimes to the exclusion of others. After a fun night of food, cards, cocktails and jokes, my mom said to me that sometimes one's love of family can become almost idolatrous because the family becomes the object of ultimate concern, perhaps even more than God. That stuck with me.

I also admit that, as a Russian Mennonite, I am sometimes guilty of idolizing my family history and heritage. I'm not going to stop being deeply connected to my cultural heritage, but I'd like to think that you all here, from many cultural heritages, are my faith family and that our faith community takes priority over my ethnicity.

(Throughout this sermon, I will take idolatry to mean a worship of something as if it is God or placing something in a place of priority above God.)

For one of my scripture passages, I've chosen Luke 14 because it is the single most challenging piece of scripture for me and I thought I'd better face it someday. The section of Luke that was read earlier is entitled "The Cost of Discipleship". It says that in order to be a true disciple we must love Jesus more than our own family. I say that it is the most challenging piece of scripture for me because it is much more difficult to imagine loving my family *less* than to imagine loving my enemies *more*.

I know that different people have different experiences with family. Some people are close to some of their family members, but not all. Some people are estranged from their families and might feel a deep sense of betrayal, and some people consider their family to be a rich group of friends or a church community. On Father's Day, some people might feel pain over a difficult or non-existent relationship with their fathers and some people might feel a sense of awkwardness or marginalization because they are raising their children in a two-mother family.

And some people feel utterly alone in this world. For these people, passages like Psalm 68 might be a particularly poignant source of comfort – that God is a father to the fatherless and sets the lonely in families – families like the church.

I have a hard time thinking about family without thinking about American evangelical “family values”. This idolization of the family has a very particular object – the nuclear, heteronormative, white, middle-class, Christian family.

There are numerous American evangelical organizations that are dedicated to strengthening the nuclear family such as Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America, Family Research Council, Traditional Values Coalition and the American Family Research Association, to name a few. All of these organizations see a direct link between the strength of the so-called “traditional family” and the health of the nation. Family is often spoken of as the “bedrock” of the nation – the foundation upon which the nation stands. And the “breakdown” of the traditional heteronormative, middle-class Christian family is blamed for all sorts of national crises.

I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the American evangelical family, in particular the sexual purity movement that involves virginity pledging for youth and purity balls for fathers and daughters.

One of the conditions that gave rise to this counter-movement is the culture of pervasive sexualization in the West, particularly of girls and young women. And there is legitimate cause for concern for all parents, not just evangelical ones.

Consider these marketing strategies. The Bratz doll brand has sold padded “bralettes” to pre-pubescent girls. Thong underwear for seven to ten year old girls has been available at stores like Abercrombie and Fitch featuring the slogans “eye candy” and “wink, wink”. And K-mart has sold young girls’ underwear that reads, “Call Me” and “I [heart] Rich Boys.”

Media sources may design and distribute these images and messages, but young girls also self-sexualize in the sense that they inherit and internalize these messages from the culture in which they live, which then seems to activate a desire *to be* sexualized. This process of “self-objectification” happens when girls adopt an

outsider's perspective, leading them to determine their own worth as objects of desire for someone else.

When they look in the mirror, they are looking through someone else's eyes at their own image – judging whether or not others will deem them pretty and sexually appealing. Sociologist Gail Dines talks about the “pornification of culture” whereby girls are bombarded with images that give them the message that they have two choices as a female in our culture: to be sexually desirable or invisible.

Concerned evangelical parents and Christian organizations deemed it necessary to provide alternative sexual messages for their children, especially their daughters. So, in 1993, the Evangelical Southern Baptist Convention initiated its sponsorship of a virginity pledge program called True Love Waits, encouraging adolescents to publicly pledge their virginity until marriage. Approximately 3 million young people have made these pledges at rallies, local Christian youth group events, college campuses and over the internet.

A pastor from Colorado Springs named Randy Wilson also started to sponsor “purity balls” for fathers and daughters as a way of promoting virginity until marriage. These balls are now hosted in 48 states and 8 countries other than the U.S.

At the purity ball, fathers and daughters are dressed as if for the prom, but are each other's dates. At many purity balls, fathers are asked to make a pledge to their daughters to protect their purity until they are married.

In turn, girls are invited to take virginity pledges. A popular example of a daughter's pledge is: “I make a promise this day to God to remain pure until the day I give myself as a wedding gift to my husband.”

Virginity, as guaranteed by the token of the purity ring on the daughter's wedding finger, is treated as the commodity that is exchanged between men; between fathers and husbands instead of as a tool of power whereby women can protect themselves from unplanned pregnancy and disease and unedifying relationships. In this way, even though the virginity movement is fighting against the sexualization of girls, I would argue that it in fact *participates* in the

sexualization of girls by objectifying *virginity as a desirable object* – as a “gift” that is given away to one’s husband on one’s wedding day. Virginity is described as a thing, an object, a treasure or a present that can be given or lost. And the bearer of virginity, the virgin girl, is by extension a precious object to be protected and then given away.

The virginity movement does not counter but participates in a culture of sexualization that idolizes and fetishizes the virtuous, female, virginal body. And this idolization of the virgin girl is a part of the idolization of the family. She is the symbolic bearer of the purity of the family. Her virginity protected until marriage safeguards the sanctity of the “traditional” family and its perpetuation of “family values” for future generations.

This is where I think it’s helpful to read Luke 14 as a corrective for all of us who idolize the family in one way or another. As a reminder, Luke says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.”

The use of the word “hate” is particularly challenging here, but it can be taken to mean that one’s loyalty must ultimately lie with God above an exclusive love of one’s own particular family or own’s own particular, narrow vision of the “ideal” family. After all, God’s love is universal, it isn’t exclusive to particular types of people and particular families.

Many mystics and monastics across religions and cultures have required detachment from certain forms of human relations, like marriage and family, as a way of becoming closer to God, as if loving others is an obstacle to union with God or with ultimate reality. Buddhists talk about the danger of clinging or being attached to things, including people. This clinging causes suffering and illusions about the nature of reality – that we can somehow hold onto something or someone forever. I remember when Mike and I were first married sometimes terror would overcome me at night as I thought about what a risk I’d taken in loving someone so much. The threat of loss seems almost unbearable. I can’t even entertain these thoughts in relation to my kids.

But I have trouble with this idea of detachment from all human relationships as a way to honour God. Does God really require that we choose between love of family and love of God in order to be a true disciple?

I turn to an unlikely source for some help with this difficult question – an article on the website of the evangelical organization The Gospel Coalition called “7 Signs We May Be Worshipping Our Family.” I will highlight four signs and add a 5th.

1. **We seldom host others.** If the family is seen primarily as a haven from the rest of the world, this may be a problem.
2. **We seldom reach out to others.** Does the love we have for our family overflow into our communities and provide a source for loving others?
3. **We seldom have time.** Are we too busy? Do we have so many lessons and family commitments that we don’t have time for others? Are we flexible enough that we can sometimes alter our routines for the sake of those outside of our immediate family?
4. **And, finally, do we speak well of others?** Or do we feel like we are in a competition to be the best family.
5. **To these I would add, do we accept the hospitality of others?**

All of these signs point to the closed family. The family that tries to protect its own at the expense of other relationships. So, I don’t think I can get to the point where I prioritize God *over* family. But, I can commit to prioritizing God *through* my family; by hosting, reaching out, making time, speaking well of others and accepting the hospitality of other families.