

Courageous Hearts – Father’s Day – June 18, 2023

To start today’s sermon, and to celebrate Father’s Day with you all, I want to tell you the first dad joke I remember my dad telling me as a kid. He pointed to a bug that had just hit our windshield and said, “What was the last thing that went through that bug’s mind as it hit the windshield?” I had no idea, but his response is forever engrained in my mind; “Its butt.” While maybe not the most traditional of dad jokes, I don’t believe my father was a “traditional” father, either.

My father taught me how to be a man. I don’t mean the kind of man that shirks weakness and emotion, but the type of man who shows empathy and kindness; what I hope are primary assets of my personality today. This is not the traditional man, as is portrayed in our society. Men are supposed to be tough, bastions of reason who show no fear. A man’s man is supposed to be cocky and self-assured, a lady’s man, a defender of masculinity in an increasingly “woke” world.

When I was about 14 years old, I was playing a computer game on the family computer when my mother asked me to go back out the van so we could get into the attic to get our suitcases; we were leaving for Las Vegas the next day and needed to get packed. I begrudgingly grabbed my mother’s mini-van keys and went out to the garage to pull the van out. I was grumpy, as I wanted to play video games, and I slammed the garage door as I left the house. I threw open the van door and got inside. Leaving the van door open, I started the vehicle, put it in reverse, and hit the gas pedal. The immediate sound of crunching scared the bejesus out of me. I panicked and my foot hit the nearest pedal, which as you can imagine, was the gas pedal. More crunching, and a loud KERTHUNK. I began to scream.

My dad loved to work with his hands. A jeweler by day, he’d taken up the hobby of woodworking and had recently purchased a few “toys” for his hobby. One was a cabinet-sized table saw, and another was a giant dust collector. Now remember how I’d left the door open to the van when I put it in reverse? That door caught the outer edge of the dust collector and the crunching I’d heard was two-fold. The first part of the crunch was the door bending beyond what the manufacturer had ever intended. The second part of the crunch was the dust collector fighting with said door and losing. The KERTHUNK I’d heard after that was the now-bent door catching the edge of the cabinet-sized table saw and tipping it on its side into the yard. The screaming, well, that was me.

Somewhere in all the havoc that I was creating, I managed to put the van in park and get out. I fell to my knees and began screaming the words, “Dad’s going to kill me” over and over. Remember, these were his new toys. My mom, hearing my screams, ran outside, immediately assuming the worst. Seeing that I was ok physically, if not mentally, she immediately called my father, who was at work. He came home, about a six-minute drive in our small city, and did the unexpected.

He gave me a hug. Said, "It's ok, it's just stuff", and made sure I was ok. I was beyond floored. Where was the yelling? The screaming? Why wasn't I being grounded, at the very least? My father knew that it was an accident. He knew that I didn't intend to do any of it, and he acted accordingly. I don't know that I could have done the same.

I'm sure he was angry. I'm sure he felt like raging to some degree, especially as we were supposed to be leaving for Las Vegas the following morning. But he held it in and he treated me with absolutely undeserved compassion.

As I said, we were leaving on a trip to Las Vegas the very next day and my dad took the van to a local body shop, and in between some hard work, foam weather strips, and bungee cords, we got the van door to close again, mostly at least. There was a bit of a whistling sound, through the door, as we drove the 5 hours to Las Vegas the next day.

My father raised me to be a good man. Everything he taught me and did made me into the man I am today. Every little thing he told me over countless conversations and everything he did in his interactions with me made me realize it's ok to be compassionate, kind, and caring, while still being a man's man. That day, as I waited for my dad to get home and murder me for ruining his table saw, I saw an act of true compassion and empathy. I saw a man put aside his own wants and needs for another; I saw a man care more about me and my well-being than himself.

Looking at our society as a whole, we can see the societal expectations of masculinity and to do that, we need only turn to one place, the media we consume. In our media, men are often portrayed as less likely to show emotions than their female counterparts, unless it's specific emotions, such as pride or anger.

When we see this type of behavior on television I believe, even in spite of our best intentions, we internalize it to some degree. One of my favorite movies is John Wick. This movie, for those who don't know, is about a man's revenge on those who killed a dog his late wife had given him. It's a pure masculine killing spree, and for a lover of action films, it's amazing. But what is it telling our society? Is revenge an okay outlet for anger? It's ok to react angrily when someone wrongs you? Are these the things we want our children to grow up learning?

Masculinity is a loaded word. My first thought, upon hearing it, is regarding toxic masculinity. But second, it's about being manly. Eating the super-hot chile your buddy dared you to eat; taking a running leap off a roof into a pool because a girl you like is watching you; trying to be the sole provider for your family because it's a woman's role to stay at home and take care of the kids; the list goes on, and it doesn't get prettier from there.

Masculinity, as it's portrayed in the United States of America can be incredibly toxic, and it promotes a level of hardness and lack of emotional openness that has helped breed the current political climate in our country. There are those in power who believe caring about others is a weakness; that helping those who are different from you denotes a flaw in your character. This doesn't apply just to men, of course. People of all genders are affected by this; they believe men should behave as men and women should behave as women. But what does that mean?

As many of you know, I have two daughters. If you've never met them, they're the two redheads you see running around after each service. I love my daughters and I do my best to raise them as I was raised; as helpful caring individuals who respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Let me tell you a quick story about my daughter Cora. She started summer camp at her school last week and met a new teacher, we'll call them Jack. Jack said they prefer not to be called Mr. or Mrs. Jack, but just Jack. Cora, the precocious girl she is, asked, "Does that mean you use they/them pronouns?" Jack looked at her, a bit shocked.

"Uhh, yeah, it does," and then as an aside to another teacher, "Did you just hear that?!"

I've raised Cora to be a respectful young lady and let me tell you, it's hard some days. I still lose my temper and yell when I shouldn't, I still get angry and frustrated when my kids aren't listening to me, but I'm always striving to be a better parent than the one I was yesterday.

I've taught my girls that it's okay to love unconditionally and without reservation. I have a friend, Chris. He's in his 50s and lives in Delaware with his wife. I've only met Chris once in person, but we play Dungeons and Dragons together online every week and have since the pandemic. Chris is one of my favorite people in the world. I was talking to my therapist about him and I told her, "I think I might be a little bit gay, not in the sexual sense of the word, but I'm just extremely fond of my buddy Chris, and I don't know how else to classify how I feel."

I equated it to the friendships of JD and Turk, from the tv show Scubs, or Shawn and Gus, from the show Psych; just two men who are head over heels for one another and love each other.

My therapist just looked at me, and it clicked. "Wait, I'm just being emotionally vulnerable in a way that's not seen a lot in society, aren't I?" She nodded her head in agreement.

That's the kind of vulnerability we need in our world and in our relationships. I'm not saying we all need to find the Turk to our JD, but I am saying we need to raise our kids knowing that it's ok to have friendships like that, no matter the gender identities of the participants.

Kids also need to be taught to respect people. Not authoritative respect, like that seen in the military or in business, but respect like that seen with Cora and her teacher. Cora immediately understood what Jack meant when they said they didn't want to be called Mr. or Mrs. and asked a clarifying question so she could address her teacher appropriately. How many adults would have been as brave?

There needs to be a societal shift when it comes to the definition of masculinity. It needs to mean more than just a man doing manly things. It needs to become synonymous with kindness, compassion, and empathy.

So what can we do, as a congregation, to enable this change? Let's start with some introspection. Spend some time examining your own perceptions and beliefs about masculinity.

How have those been influenced by societal stereotypes? Next, let's encourage frank and open discussions with family and friends about what masculinity is and what it should become.

The next one is harder, but I still encourage everyone to do it. Be mindful of the media you consume. This is hard for me, because I love movies like John Wick and Die Hard, and I'm not saying we shouldn't watch those, but we should be mindful of how it's shaping our perceptions and beliefs.

For parents, discussing these issues with your children is key, especially when they're young. Early conversations on these topics can help shape a child's worldview and help them become better, well-rounded individuals.

As I stated earlier, my father was a driving force in my life, one that helped me become the man you see before you today. He's introduced me to the kind of masculinity that doesn't rely on anger or puffed-up chests to get a point across, but instead relies on honesty, integrity, and compassion. He raised me to be a warm and caring person, and even more importantly, a loving father who cherishes his children more than anything.

Let's not just cheer for the good dads and fatherly figures in our lives, but also celebrate the qualities that make them stand out - their kindness, their compassion, and their love. Remember, it's about shaking up the definition of 'being a man' and sharing this new understanding with our kids, our friends, and everyone we meet.

Just like my dad taught me, being a true man isn't about flexing muscles or being the loudest in the room. It's about honesty, care, and respect for others. It's about being there for your loved ones and leading with kindness. So here's to all the fathers, the father figures, and the men who are redefining what it means to be 'manly'. Thank you, and Happy Father's Day!