

**Father Figure**  
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Mothers Day...then Fathers Day.

Mothers Day in May...then a few weeks later, Fathers Day in June. Seems like something of an afterthought doesn't it? Mothers! And then, oh yeah, Fathers.

Historically, it appears that it *was* something of an afterthought; or maybe best to say that it was not an afterthought so much as an *understandable extension* of Mothers Day celebrations.

The first Fathers Day service was held on July 5, 1908 at what was then the Williams Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church and what is now the Central United Methodist Church of Fairmont, West Virginia. As the first Mothers Day service was held in the church just a couple months prior to that date, and as one woman sought a way to commemorate the hundreds of men who had died in a mining explosion that year (many of them fathers), she, along with the minister, hit upon the idea of having a Fathers Day service.

Sonora Smartt Dodd of Spokane, Washington in 1909 had not heard about that service of the previous year in West Virginia, but came up with the idea on her own. Her mother had died in childbirth when Sonora was just 16 after which Sonora helped her father raise the younger six children. As *she* listened to a Mothers Day sermon, she wondered why there was not a corresponding celebration of fathers. She approached the Spokane Washington Ministerial Alliance with her idea and a Father's Day was celebrated June 19, 1910 in Spokane, Washington.

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson came to Spokane and spoke at Father's Day services. In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed a presidential proclamation declaring the third Sunday of June as Father's Day. In 1972, President Nixon established a permanent national observance of Father's Day to be held on the 3rd Sunday of June each year. On June 9, 2008 [the House of Representatives](#) passed a bill that *calls on fathers across the United States to use Father's Day to reconnect and rededicate themselves to their children's lives, to spend Father's Day with their children, and to express their love and support for their children.*

So Fathers Day has become a reasonable companion to Mothers Day, borne from its rib one might say, but whereas Mothers Day has noble if tangled roots in the peace movement, inviting people to honor their mothers but also inviting mothers to wield their natural power for important social change, Fathers Day still seems to me like...well, an afterthought. If there had not been a Mothers Day, there is nothing to suggest that there would ever have been a Fathers Day. In introducing [the bill in 1913](#), Representative J. Hampton Moore of Philadelphia even termed it a holiday "upon which as an expression of sentiment *corresponding to that of Mothers Day*, the rose, irrespective of color, shall be regarded as the emblem."

A rose? Really? We couldn't even get our own expression of sentiment? The whole idea of a flower didn't go over with many of the men of his time who, even if they loved roses, were culturally

conditioned never to admit such a thing. One smart-aleck quipped that the [dandelion was the appropriate flower](#) for the day because "the more it is trampled on, the more it grows."

And critics of the time were pitiless as they wondered aloud where this holiday trend might take the country: Grandparents Day? Maiden Auntie's Day? Bachelor Uncle's Day? House Pet Day? Clean Up Your House Day (which would seem like a natural companion to House Pet Day). Secretaries Day? Bosses Day? Trash Collectors Day? Ministers Day? Please, stop!

And as it was modeled on Mothers Day, Fathers Day comes with the same baggage; the same questions for us today. What is the purpose of such holidays? In the case of Mothers Day, some of the early advocates felt that it could be used as a call to action, inspiring the mothers of the world to take responsibility for the well-being of the children of the world. Some felt that it was a celebration to be enjoyed by individuals and families paying respect to their own mothers. Some felt that it was a celebration of motherhood in general, the qualities and traits of mothering.

Fathers Day suffers from the same fuzzy focus: some see it as a time to pay tribute to one's own father. Some feel that it is a celebration of not only fathers and fatherhood, but the qualities of fathering as practiced by mentors of all sorts. This week, President Obama used it as a springboard to call fathers to take responsibility for their children, to discover their manhood in their active and involved fatherhood. [The President](#), most often quite careful in his choice of words, talked himself into one of the pitfalls inherent in a Fathers Day focus:

He said, "*We need fathers to realize that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child - it's the courage to raise one.*"

Now what he most likely meant is that what makes you a *father* (in the full and most moral sense of the word) is not the ability to have a child—which is nothing more than involuntary biological potential—but the courage to raise a child—which is the voluntary, intentional assumption of responsibility and connection. *That's* what makes you a *father*. A *parent*. No argument there. But what he said was, "what makes you a *man*."

The truth that gets lost in our focus on Mothers Day / Fathers Day is that you can be a *man* without being a father. And you can be a *woman* without being a mother. And you can be a *family* without being a mother/father/children/*nuclear family*. There is a tendency on such holidays, as I mentioned on Mothers Day, to oversimplify, to romanticize, to look around at our admittedly mixed up, messed up, shook up world and to sentimentally yearn for (and to then create) a simpler time in our memory that never really existed. To imagine that the problems of our age can be overcome if we just adhere to and stubbornly defend a particular configuration of family, the Perfect Family Recipe.

Now don't get me wrong...I have nothing against calling people to personal responsibility. I have nothing against pointing out the suffering that is caused when a father abandons his family. [Writer Rick Bragg](#) powerfully evokes the painful presence of a father's absence when he recounts an older writer friend urging Bragg to face his pain and write about his father. "My boy," he told Bragg, "there is no place you can go where he will not be."

But, along with irresponsible absence, I also wish to point out the harm that can be caused by irresponsible *judgment*; an immovable *certainty* about what is right. [Kafka's letter to his father](#) captures this latter harm. Franz Kafka is now heralded as one of the most important writers in the twentieth

century—many would say one of the most important writers of all time—but to his father, apparently, he was an utterly ungrateful failure. Son Franz writes:

*What was always incomprehensible to me was your total lack of feeling for the suffering and shame you could inflict on me with your words and judgments. It was as though you had no notion of your own power.*

There is a pressure--maybe weighing most heavily on fathers—that one should have a firm handle on what is right; what is proper; what is best; what is successful; what is acceptable; and that one should *instill* that in one's children; that the infusion of this certainty will somehow protect them against harm. But all too often, rather than protecting the child, the judgment that accompanies this unrealistic endeavor only serves to sever the connection between parent and child; it is a careless and destructive use of power. The awful rigidity that often accompanies such a purpose ensures that the parent cannot bend to allow for the individuality of the child, and the relationship breaks. Because there is this imperative to simplify what is not simple—that being life itself—the father, the parent, causes suffering and shame.

And so does a society. This kind of rigid certainty on a societal level, in defining marriage and family, causes a similar harm, a corresponding disconnection, subverting the very values that it was meant to protect. [Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan](#), in opening up Paul's image of God the Father, point out that Paul was not seeking to attach a gender to God; he was using the image of the homemaker, to point out that all whom he addressed were part of God's family and to ask some pointed questions about life in that home:

“Is there a just, fair, and equal distribution of rights and responsibilities, of duties and privileges? Are all the children well fed, clothed, and sheltered? Does everyone have enough? Do some members get far more than they need, while others get far less?”

I have nothing against some deep reflection and bold action regarding parenting as it relates to the kind of future we are leaving our children and their children and their children's children. I have nothing against a vigorous debate and engagement in exploring what will strengthen our families and benefit our children. And I have no doubt that Mothers Day and Fathers Day can serve as opportunities to call us to that action and reflection.

But if our focus is really the well-being of children, why not have (as kids are always suggesting) a Childrens Day, where everyone can pause to reflect, whatever their role and sphere of influence, on the impact they have on the children of the world? Why not call for engagement with the questions of how we support families of all configurations? Why not highlight, not the gender of parents or the make-up of the family, but the qualities that we know make a difference; qualities like love and discipline and encouragement and support and shared activities and a diversity of adult role models and community connection and hope...How do we nurture hope for all families, gay and straight, single parent families, extended families, step families...how do we nurture hope for all people?

Speaking as a father, I can tell you absolutely, positively...well, I can't tell you much absolutely and positively. I have struggled with how to do it right, at every stage of our son's life. I fight off regret about things I did or left undone. I worry about the effects of wrestling with all my own issues on his life. I struggle to bring my highest self to the task of parenting; to act always in his best interest, and not my own comfort; to face the hard stuff. I love him deeply, which can be a profound joy and can also

ache like no other ache I've ever felt. I respect him, and I judge him too harshly, and I've snapped at him about little things and I've let him off too easy on bigger things, and I nag him, and I joke with him, and I don't listen to him, and I do listen, and I keep trying to be that guide whom love sustains. And if I can be successful in giving him just one thing--besides my love which is a given, a constant, a presence that will be there no matter what—if I can be successful at passing along only one other thing to him, it will be hope.

President Obama said,

*[T]he final lesson we must learn as fathers is also the greatest gift we can pass on to our children - and that is the gift of hope.*

*I'm not talking about an idle hope that's little more than blind optimism or willful ignorance of the problems we face. I'm talking about hope as that spirit inside us that insists, despite all evidence to the contrary, that something better is waiting for us if we're willing to work for it and fight for it. If we are willing to believe.*

Creating hope is a responsibility. It is a responsibility that this congregation has taken on in the work of our mission. It is one which we seek to attain, not with the rigid certainty and judgment inspired by fear, but with a commitment to open-hearted understanding and acceptance and a deep faith that love will—always--guide us.