

Sermon on Jeremiah 23, 16-29, 18.06.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Dear Congregation,
today is Father's Day. Here in North America this is actually a day, which is not taken quite as seriously as Mother's Day.

The reason being, in the opinion of the comedian Bill Cosby, that women are much better organized. He has said once that mothers are simply smarter, because they gather their children around them in time and point out that Mother's Day is approaching and say: "Go to Daddy, ask for money and then you go and buy something nice for Mummy." – Fathers also give their children money. But they go and buy three packages of underwear for \$5.00 each, unwrap them and give half of them to the Salvation Army. On top of that, they keep the change. "That means, so Bill Cosby, that mothers receive a beautiful and expensive gift, fathers, on the contrary, walk around in cheap underwear and know that their children have made a profit of \$85.00."

We owe the fact that we celebrate Father's Day to Sonora Smart Dodd, who sat in Spokane, Washington, in church, listening to a Mother's Day sermon on a morning in May 1909. As her mother had died young, she thought of her father and found that there should be some way to recognize fathers, too. She pleaded for introducing Father's Day. Mother's Day exists since 1914, Father's Day since 1972.

How did it happen that, as a rule, mothers receive – hopefully – more recognition, that it is somehow easier to give them presents and honour them? Mothers and women may now say, this is because they are more modest and that fathers tend to lean towards the theatrical and view themselves as terribly important.

But, to remain in the self-critical tone, I think that, indeed, we fathers often want to do the best for our children, but then we realize somehow, that we cannot convey this as it is intended, and it is not accepted that way. Sometimes we do not even notice this.

There was the father, who sang to his four-year old son every night, which was well meant. Everything went fine until the moment when he overheard a conversation his son had with his two years older sister. The boy said: "Daddy sings out of tune." – "Yes, I know, said the girl, it is best if you pretend to fall asleep, because he will stop singing then."

Perhaps it is a peculiar phenomenon that we men are unable to balance closeness and distance well. We want to be as popular and loved as mothers, but often do not possess the natural talent and this certain instinct of how to develop this heartfelt closeness with other people.

Perhaps it is because women bear the children and are more engaged emotionally throughout their life. But perhaps it is also because men want to approach things basically in a different way, and because of all their principles lose spontaneity, which is often necessary for reacting to others.

To surprise others, do something out of the ordinary, bearing no grudge. Show feelings and be able to let things go as they may, are not necessarily the strengths of many men.

As I say every year, we celebrate Father's Day every time we come together on Sundays; I want to use this opportunity and see, whether a Biblical text can help us here. Perhaps we can learn from God our Father, how to become better fathers.

The sermon text for today speaks of God:

Text:

16)Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who philosophy to you, filling you with vain hopes; they speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. 17)They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD: 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say: 'No evil shall come upon you.'" 18)For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD to perceive and to hear his word, or who has given heed to his word and listened? 19) Behold the storm of the LORD! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. 20)The anger of the LORD will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his mind. In the latter days you will understand it clearly. 21)"I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. 22)But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way' and from the evil of their doings. 23)Am I a God at hand, says the LORD, and not a God afar off? 24)Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? Says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? Says the LORD. 25)I have heard what the prophets have said, who prophesy lies in my name, saying: "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" 26)How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies and who prophesy the deceit in their own heart, 27)who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams which they tell one another, even as their fathers forego my name for Baal? 28)Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the Lord. 29)Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces?

This does not really sound particularly tender or less principled. God is cross. He is upset. Most of all, because the so-called prophets are seemingly saying all kinds of things about God, but in the end throw dust into people's eyes. They lie to you when they tell you everything is okay. No problem, it does not matter how you conduct yourself, God will certainly forgive you! Prophets saying this were not sent by me. They talk about some dreams or visions and take them at face value, although they should actually preach my word. They preach straw to you, I give you wheat through my word, and both have nothing in common. Something goes out from my word; it is like fire and like a hammer.

What meaning has this now for us? Does it help us in some way at all, to clarify our father role, or does it not correspond exactly to the criticism of many women and children, that we men are obstinate and are quickly upset?

One has to be careful in making simple comparisons and should not compare God with any one of us. God does not become cross without reason – I wish I could say that of myself, too. God's wrath has the aim of making it clear, that much is at stake if his word is proclaimed as something else. It shall not be that people are flattered and do not have to confront their own deeds, as the false prophets propagate. Insofar, the value of this text lies not in our imitation of God's wrath, but in taking God's word seriously.

God's word wanted and always wants to challenge people to reflect on themselves. Jesus, too, has made the connection, which is addressed here, clear in his first sermon, namely, about repentance, about conversion and about faith: "Repent and believe in the Gospel!"

All self-determination in our role as father, as husband, as mother, as child, has also to do with our attempt to make faith a part of our life. The question is, do we live the way God wants for our own sake? Do we give the love we can give? What can we change that we are able to do this, or that the good intention, to give love, is understood? Often the good will is not lacking, but the ability to transmit it.

Men, as a rule, are really quite awkward, when it is about showing love.

Recently, I heard the story about a couple who had fought all their life. Now they were to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary, and the children faced the problem of giving one gift to both their parents. The best thing they could think of was an appointment with a psychiatrist. They took their parents to him and, of course, the squabbling began immediately, even in front of the totally unfamiliar, young psychiatrist. He listened for a while, rose after 15 minutes, approached the woman, gave her a Hollywood- style kiss. "Bill, he said to the husband, this is exactly what your wife needs at least three times a week." Bill was perplexed for a moment and then said to the psychiatrist: "Fine, no problem, I can bring her here on Monday, Wednesday and Friday."

God's aim is to love people, and not to give them what they need three times a week, but every day.

When God becomes angry and, in this paragraph of the prophet Jeremiah, scolds people, who turn his word into a farce, he fears that people are driven further away from him by these talks.

God as Father loves us. But it is also necessary, as in true family life, that certain principles are not questioned. God's word is the only way for us to recognize how much God takes the trouble over us, no matter whether we are good or bad fathers.

The most important thing is that we turn to this God, who has not even spared his own son, and first of all recognize that he loves us the way we are. In spite of this, he does not want us to stay the way we are and calls us through his word into the responsibility of reflecting on ourselves.

You see, when we as fathers, for instance, never have time for our children, or treat them like a thing, which we can take out and put away again as we please, we have no reason to be surprised if we have no intimate relationship. If we, as fathers, lack the principles and convictions, values which we want to impart, however, also values to which we ourselves adhere; we will never achieve raising our children to become responsible adults.

Closeness happens, where we become conscious of how to accept our role in the family or wherever with God's help and realize it according to the best of our knowledge and abilities.

I have heard, when Adam and Eve left paradise, God has put a coin into their hands; on one side was written the word love and on the other the word forgiveness. Both belong together. One does not exist without the other. We should make use of this coin. And even though, as fathers, we put on \$5.00 underwear and the cradle-songs for our children sound terrible, we may know that our wives and children, too, hold this coin in their hands. Amen.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.