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Date: June 19, 2016
Sermon Title: Dads and Grads Sunday
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Psalm 23

Mother's Day and Father's Day present exciting and fun opportunities for us to toy with gender, gender roles, and even gender theology. Christians have twisted themselves into pretzels trying to decide whether God is male or female or other; mother-like or father-like or other. Should we call God "he" or "him" or "it," or throw in "she" from time to time? Of course, down deep we know that God is more, always more, more than we can imagine, more than we can describe or define or picture.

Which is why God himself (*oops!*) asks us *not* to describe God. It's one of the Ten Commandments, right up there with "Thou shalt not kill" or "steal." God says, "Thou shalt not make any graven image." No images. Don't make me into anything! Why? Because God is more, more than a he or she, more than a sculpture or a painting.

I don't blame God, but I think God was too idealistic, which I suppose is God's job, but it still makes it tough on us. Turns out we humans need to picture things. We like descriptions and definitions, specifics. We want to know things in detail, with clarity. And so we do picture God and describe God and define God. God is our heavenly Father . . . or Mother. God is our Judge, Lord, King. God is creator, loving, refuge, savior, merciful.

You see this painting here? This summer we are featuring what we call "Faith Art" in our Church, original art that explores faith. In fact, I'm looking for more art. All I ask is that it be original, either you did it, or you purchased it. This painting is one of the first paintings Alida and I purchased. It's called "Face of God I and Face of God II" by a Canadian Christian artist, Ray Dirks. *Face of God I and Face of God II*, two faces of God, two depictions. Whenever people come to our house, they end up looking at it intensely, trying to catch the differences. Some see one as male, the other as female. Some see each one as part male and part female. For some, one is more gentle, one is more sorrowful. Either way, it gets you thinking about God.

Certainly, one of the enduring ideas of God is God as Father. Jesus even invites us to begin our prayer, "Our Father, who art in heaven," and he even refers to God with a more intimate word, "Abba," which is like "Daddy." Jesus was helping us to personalize God, to bring us closer, to get us to think about the best qualities of God. Historically, fathers are thought of as protectors, providers, strong, reliable, trustworthy, dignified, unflappable. Sort of Gregory Peck, Alan Ladd, John Wayne, Gary Cooper types.

Some years ago, I had a retreat, "Gender Language in Church," and one of the sessions was about "The Lord's Prayer," and having to refer to God as "Father." One woman said with great emotion, "I hate the Lord's Prayer. I had an abusive father, and I can't stand thinking that God is our Father." Sitting next to her was another woman, and she said, "I had an abusive father, too, and that's why I love the Lord's Prayer. I need to think that a father really could be like God."

Because this is Father's Day, we're using that powerful image today. Our opening hymn takes the best of that imagery, that theology, and places it front and center: "This Is My Father's World," and it goes on to happily proclaim the delights of dwelling safely in "Father's World,"

*This is my Father's world,
And to my listening ears
All nature sings, and round me rings
The music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world:
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas--
His hand the wonders wrought.*

*This is my Father's world:
The birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white,
Declare their Maker's praise.
This is my Father's world:
He shines in all that's fair;
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere.*

And then, Orlando happens and San Bernardino happens, Newtown happens, Columbine happens. War and terrorism and evil and injustice happen, the slaughter of the innocents happens again and again and again. We want to scream at the hymn writer, "What about that, Mr. Hymn Writer, with all your

birds and trees and rustling grass and skies and seas, what about that other stuff that seems to much a part of our 'Fathers World' you sing about so glibly?" And verse 3 is the hymn writer's answer:

*This IS my Father's world:
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.
This is my Father's world:
Why should my heart be sad?
The Lord is King: let the heavens ring!
God reigns; let earth be glad!*

Last Sunday we all woke up to the horrible story or Orlando. The city of fun and fantasy, Cinderella and Mickey Mouse, suddenly met Satan face to face. A hatred rooted in warped religion and twisted beliefs, in mental illness and deadly weapons, in self-loathing and ancient prejudice . . . that hatred that is anti-God, anti-life, anti-freedom, anti-Christian . . . that hatred tried to destroy our "Father's World." It did not. It will not.

Thursday night Alida represented us on the Norwalk City Hall Green, along with Tony Hwang, for a gathering of people of good will, of strong love, of living faith; Godly people, Christian, Muslim, Jew, clergy, gay leaders, civic leaders, all there to proclaim, "Let us not forget! That though the wrong can seem so strong, God is the ruler yet, why should our hearts be sad? The Lord is King. Let the earth be glad!"

I know a lot of people have complaints about Obama and about Bush, about how they've dealt with terrorism. But both presidents share a key quality with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. They all believe the only thing that could ever defeat us is fear. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," he said.

On Monday night we had our own Orlando prayer service right here in our little Church. We began with the same little chorus we started Church with today.

*Lead me, Lord.
Lead me in thy righteousness.
Make thy way plain before my face.
For it is thou, Lord
That makest me dwell in safety.*

We played the speech that “Hamilton’s” Broadway star, Lin-Manuel Miranda, gave at the Tony Awards. It ends with, “It is love, it is love, it is love, it is love, it . . . is . . . love.”

We remembered all those mostly young, mostly Hispanic, mostly gay, all American, all God-created people who died that day. And we spoke loud and clear the Scriptures from our Bible that proclaim our unstoppable faith, our eternal hope, our undying love. And we ended with the 23rd Psalm. Let us say it together now.

Psalm 23

Jr. Deacon: The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

People: *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

Jr. Deacon: He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

People *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

Jr. Deacon: Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

People: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

All *We will fear no evil. We will not fear. We will not fear. Together, one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4:5). Together, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Together, Lord, not quibbling over politics, sexuality, religion, gender or race. Together, in this Church, where faith, hope, and love abide. But the greatest is Love, for God is Love, and Love never ends. Amen*