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Our Saviour/St. Stephen  
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Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, we all know that a child's relationship to his or her father is very significant, right?

Of course, a child's relationship to his or her mother is also very significant.

But today, I want us to think about the relationship of a child to his or her father.

I know, for instance, with my own father, our relationship has had it challenges.

My father comes from that generation where it was difficult I think for fathers to say the words, "I love you."

Now, I always knew my dad loved me.

He has always been a great provider for my brothers and me.

My brothers and I have never been in want of anything.

So, yes, my brothers and I always knew our father loved us, but it was just something he didn't say.

And it wasn't until I was in my twenties that I had enough maturity to say to my dad, "I know you love me, Dad. But sometimes it is good to hear it."

And so, he told me he loved me on that occasion.

But even so, he doesn't usually say it on the phone when we conclude our conversation.

Funny, though, he always signs his letters to me, "Love, Dad."

So yes, a child's relationship with their dad can be challenging at times.

PAUSE

And I bring this up, because I was recently reading a book about Jesus' relationship, or really the lack thereof, with his "biological dad."

Now, the book of which I am speaking is called *The Gospel According to Jesus* by Stephen Mitchell.

And it is interesting book, with this very interesting take on Jesus and his relationship with his "biological dad."

For in this book, Mitchell speaks at length to this idea that the human Jesus was of all things an illegitimate child, who did not know his biological dad.

Indeed, Mitchell says, "[this notion of Jesus as an illegitimate child] will be a kind of silent bass that accompanies everything I try to intuit about Jesus' life."

In other words, Mitchell wants us to understand that all that he writes in his book is to be read through that lens—that Jesus was an illegitimate child.

That indeed we should read the Gospels about Jesus' life with this same lens.

Now WE realize that this smacks of heresy, right?, for we all understand Jesus to have been the offspring of Mary and the Holy Spirit, AND the adopted son of Joseph (which in truth is only mentioned in Matthew's and Luke's gospel).

But, Mitchell says that Jesus was an illegitimate child, born of Mary, but who never knew his biological dad.

And Mitchell says that the Gospel writers have had to contend with this fact about Jesus, for to be an illegitimate child in the time of Jesus would have been scandalous.

It would have severely hampered Jesus, hindered Jesus.

It would have disadvantaged Jesus.

"Mamzerim," the term used in Hebrew for illegitimate children, were hampered in choosing a marriage partner.

Mamzerim couldn't marry into priestly families, nor marry members from the tribe of Levites, nor marry legitimate Israelites, nor even illegitimate children of priests.

Mamzerim also could not hold public office.

And if mamzerim took part in a court decision, that decision was considered invalid.

Even the redemption of mamzerim at the end time, their very salvation was up for debate.

And so, to be an illegitimate child carried a serious societal taboo.

So, if Jesus indeed was an illegitimate child, it would cause a bit of a problem for the early Christian church, which is something then the early writers would have had to try to explain.

And so, in the birth narratives of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, Jesus is described as having been conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But even so, Mitchell says the Gospel writers didn't clean up all the details.

Why, for instance, in Luke's Gospel does a pregnant Mary go to see her cousin Elizabeth?

Is it perhaps to get Mary out of town, so that the "scandal" of Mary's pregnancy can be avoided?

And why does Matthew in chapter one of his Gospel mention several women in Jesus' ancestry, women who had very questionable pasts?

Tamar's children were born of incest.

Rahab was a prostitute.

Ruth got her second husband Obed by questionable means.

And Bathsheba was taken against her will by David.

Why are all these women mentioned in Jesus' ancestry, except perhaps to say to the reader, "There is a theme here, and so we should not condemn Jesus' paternal origins so quickly"?

And then there is that interesting passage in Mark's Gospel, where Jesus goes to his hometown.

This is chapter 6 in Mark's gospel, verse 1 and following.

It says, “Jesus came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the SON OF MARY and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us? And they took OFFENSE at him. And Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.’”

Notice here, Jesus is described as “the son of Mary.”

There is no mention of Jesus being the son of Joseph.

To which we would say, “Well, Jesus wasn’t the son of Joseph. He was the son of God born of the Holy Spirit.”

BUT it is only in those later Gospels, Matthew and Luke, where we hear that Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit.

Mark doesn’t mention this at all.

And so, it is quite interesting that Mark says Jesus is the “SON OF MARY.”

For in Judaism, a man was normally called the son of their father.

If the child was called the son of their mother, it indicated that the child’s father was unknown and that that child was illegitimate.

So yes, there are some places in the Gospels where we find ourselves wondering what is going on?

There are some places in the Gospels where we are left scratching our heads.

PAUSE

But, let’s play along here for a moment.

Let’s accept Mitchell’s premise that for a moment, that Jesus was actually an illegitimate child, who did not know his father.

Or, if that is too uncomfortable for us, let’s do this...

Let's say that Jesus was indeed the adopted son of Joseph, conceived by Mary and the Holy Spirit, which nonetheless was probably very confusing for the young child Jesus growing up.

"Who is my father?" asks Jesus of Mary. "Well, it's like this," says Mary, "You were born of the Holy Spirit."

PAUSE

And so, Mitchell says in his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, that it may be that Jesus had a very challenging childhood with respect to who his father was.

This aspect of Jesus' upbringing may have been instrumental, may have been the lynchpin, in fact, in the formation of the Christian faith.

Or, at least one large part of the Christian faith, in which Christians came to see God as the Father.

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Now, to be sure, we have to remember that transformative, historical events don't just happen in a vacuum.

But they happen in context.

And yes, to be sure, the Jewish faith was beginning to speak of God as Father.

Jesus didn't originate that idea, but he certainly runs with it. Jesus certainly understood God as Abba, Father.

And we have to remember as well that in the Roman Empire, at the time of Jesus, the Emperor was the "Father of the Fatherland." That was one title of the Emperor.

The Emperor was understood as the Father over his children, those persons who lived under his rule in the Roman Empire.

And so again, transformative events don't happen in a vacuum.

They happen in context.

But Jesus also certainly would have been struggling to make sense of who his father was—Holy Spirit, Joseph, or some unknown individual he never knew.

PAUSE

And so, we come to our text today, and I think we hear text differently given what we have been talking about.

“No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me,” says Jesus.

Jesus sees God as his heavenly Father.

“Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me,” says Jesus.

“Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.”

PAUSE

I am not saying that Mitchell is correct—that Jesus is an illegitimate child.

But whatever Jesus’ circumstances with relation to his Father—however it was explained to him about who his father was—may have informed his understanding, and spawned then the revelation that became Christianity, whereby we worship God as Father.

PAUSE

It is not unheard of, of course, for individuals to take their life experiences which may have proved to be the most challenging of circumstances, and to use those experiences in powerful ways.

When (Nadine and Otis and) I were travelling through the South recently as part of the Thriving Together program, sponsored by Messiah University, our tour group had the opportunity to meet and to listen to a man, who had been wrongfully convicted of murder, who had been on death row for 30 years, before he was finally released.

This man Anthony Ray Hinton told us about what his experience was like.

He shared his story with us, and his story was heartbreaking, and inconceivable, but ultimately redemptive.

For “Ray” as he is called...Ray says he now goes around the country sharing his story, and he speaks out about the criminal justice system—and its need

for reform, and the need for the abolishment of the death penalty, for it is a cruel and unusual punishment, where people linger for years on death row, and where innocent persons are murdered for crimes they didn't commit.

And Ray's witness—to hear his story is to be profoundly changed, let me tell you.

Thirty years on death row—if we can even begin to imagine.

PAUSE

Yes, individuals who experience hardship or challenges can and are transformed by those experiences, and do take and use those experiences in profound ways.

Ray now is a powerful voice for criminal justice reform.

And Jesus...well, Jesus, he just spawned a worldwide religion maybe because of who he was growing up with an uncertain parentage.

God is our Father. He is the Father of us all.

And all of us, yes, experience some difficulty with our relationship with our heavenly Father, because as Jesus says, "No one has seen the Father, except, except Jesus who by some revelation of grace, came then to embody the love of the Father for all of us to see.

And we then know our heavenly Father only...ONLY because of Jesus' love for us on the cross.

And it is our responsibility then to make that love evident to others by grace, by mercy, by abundant compassion and forgiveness.

We are to take and share that love of the Father with all people.

Thanks be to God. Amen.