

It is Father’s Day, and I know that all of us are probably thinking about fathers, grandfathers, step fathers, all kinds of fathers, for better or for worse, at different times of our lives. There are many thoughts we have about fathers, and perhaps its best to start with gratitude for the positive things.

I think of my own dad. He taught us things about “running the race with perseverance.” He would stick to his projects until they were done. He also taught us about honesty. I will always remember a lesson when I was in my teens; he had me go to the neighbors’ house and confess that I had broken the window, that I had thrown the basketball, that we had neglected to open the garage door under the hoop! My Dad also taught me about some of the limits of life, that I couldn’t always get straight A’s in every subject, and it was not a crime or a personal failing to find a particular college course difficult. We learn that we have limits, and that we can make mistakes. And blessed are the fathers who admit they can make mistakes too, that they have their limits, that they have flaws. My Dad loved to say: “I could be wrong, ‘cause I was once!”

Thinking of men in general, one key flaw I think is not admitting limits or not admitting flaws and being out of touch with feelings, especially feelings of sadness or vulnerability. This can be a dangerous thing if there’s too much toughing it out, or needing to show a tough-guy exterior. It can lead to using excessive force at times when only some force is needed. It can lead to letting anger turn into violence. So we look for fathers who know how to blend their strength with patience and kindness. Some of us have had father figures in addition to our own fathers: They might be neighbors, uncles, step fathers, counselors, perhaps teachers, people who have been “like fathers” to us.

But now I move on to the idea of a “Heavenly Father.” We are here to worship a God who is beyond us. So I want to talk a little about a “heavenly father.” Our opening song included the idea of “Father.” “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind,” was a poem penned by John Greenleaf Whittier. Jesus, in his own prayers, talks about a Heavenly Father and teaches us to pray that way: “Our Father who art in Heaven,” and in other prayers He mentioned the

word “Father” many times. I don’t have the inclination or belief that Jesus meant to say that his heavenly parent was male, yet it was the language of his culture, the language of his time.

The prophet Hosea spoke about God as a father to Israel; this is all good poetry, using metaphors for a God who is beyond our imagination. He uses a double metaphor to speak about God as a parent, and Israel as a child: *“I taught you to walk; I took you in my arms; I leaned down with compassion and eased the yoke upon your jaws, and eased any oppression that you had, and I bent down to all of you.”* Then there is the famous parable of Jesus about the lost son, the prodigal son, the son who goes off and squanders his father’s wealth. But who was the father? The father was like God. The Father took him back, forgave him, gave him another chance.

I want to reiterate that all language about “God” is metaphorical in some sense. As we have seen, God can be like a parent. God can also be like a “rock,” or a “fortress.” God has been likened to an “evergreen tree” who gives shelter, something to ponder as we sit here under a beautiful tree. God has been likened to eagles’ wings that give shelter. Even the word “Lord” is a kind of a metaphor. Lord could mean master or teacher. In the Hebrew Scriptures LORD also means “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” In the famous “Prayer of St. Francis,” God is addressed as “O Divine Master.” Many Christians nowadays use words like “Holy One,” or “Spirit of the Living God,” emphasizing that god is neither male nor female.

The New Testament lesson about “running the race,” says: “Let us set aside every weight and run the race with perseverance.” This is not specifically a physical race. Again, it is a metaphor: it is the race of goodness, the race of faith, and the perseverance needed for all actions which are helpful to our society. But if we’re all about action and justice, we can be frenetic about it and get burnt out. As with competitive runners, we can’t simply run all the time without rest. On the other hand, if we’re all about preparation through prayer, we can have ineffectual prayers and never put our feet to the ground; We need to have practical results for our times of prayer. We need both prayer preparation and bold action. In our current milieu, we

have to realize that racial justice is a long process for us to work on, so we need endurance. We need to run the race with endurance. It’s not about one or two marches. It’s not about one policy. It’s about changing our mindset and action over many, many years. But we need to immerse our actions in prayer. All good goals need to be bathed in prayer and envisioned in prayer.

In the analogy of a race, our fight against the coronavirus is a marathon, not a sprint. This is a long haul, so we need prayer that will give us strength and endurance to keep running the race. In the daily devotionals of the UCC, on June 7th Marchae’ Grair wrote about a “prayer closet” that her grandmother spoke of. Marchae’ wondered whether it was a magical closet in her bedroom into which her grandmother disappeared! She finally figured out that it meant spending a little quiet time somewhere connecting with God. And she said that she was trying to accept that “most answers from God come from getting to know God and oneself over many years—years and years of deep listening and deep thinking,” not some moment of a booming voice or thunder “like in some movies,” but listening for that steady, inner voice that can guide us. Marchae’ closes with this prayer, *“Are you there God? It’s me Marchae’. I’ll stay in this stillness until you answer, no matter how long it takes.”* Isn’t that a beautiful prayer? It sounds like that song we just heard: “You raise me up:” *“When I am down, and oh my soul so weary.. then I am still, and wait in the silence, until you come and sit a while with me.”*

So, our place for prayer could be a closet; it could be a certain room; it could be a quiet trail; it could be a certain view, or maybe our prayer could be a certain song. “Until *you* come and sit a while with me.” I wonder, Who is that “you?” It could be an earthly parent, but it could also very well be prayer with a heavenly father or parent. That “you” could be the Holy Spirit, or could be the Lord Jesus himself; the composer left it to our imaginations, perhaps even an unnamed spirit, an unnamed presence, that comes often with a sense of peace, or a new focus.

On this Father’s Day, I recall many happy moments with my father. I was very lucky I think. I followed him around a lot in his workshop, and

learned how to do many things, with perseverance. Sure, he had his limits. He was a human being. I know there were certain things I would have liked from him that I didn't receive fully. With regards to the metaphor of God as “heavenly Father,” I confess that I haven't liked it for a while, because I have been very heavily influenced by the feminist movement and very influenced by reason and rationality, which would say that God is neither male nor female. So I myself do not use the term Father often. But as I grow older, I realize and experience more and more that we are reaching to a God beyond our imagination, so the metaphor “Heavenly Father” is one among many, and is helpful to many people. Jesus himself used varied metaphors for God, Shepherd being one of the most famous.

Heavenly Father, Heavenly Parent. I definitely enjoy the idea of God as a mother or father spirit. It can work for me in my prayers, the idea that God corrects and comforts and guides, like a parent. So, in that spirit, I would like to close with singing the “Our Father.” When I sing it as a prayer, I'm not distracted by thoughts about the gender bias of its time, but simply immerse myself in the beautiful intention of the prayer, and the beautiful music by Albert H. Malotte.

Please enter the spirit of prayer with me, so that our “Father who art in heaven” can help strengthen us to “run the race with perseverance.”