



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Fathers and Men

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother"—this is the first commandment with a promise: "so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:1-4).

On this Father's Day I want to say a few words about the calling many of us have to be fathers in particular and men of character in general.

I've been reading Jim O'Brien's new book, *Golden Arms: Six Hall of Fame Quarterbacks from Western Pennsylvania*. Of the twenty-three quarterbacks in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, six are from our area. That's a remarkable thing, more than one-fourth of the total nationwide. You can read the book to find out who they are, but I started with Danny Marino, who grew up in Oakland and led Pitt to a nearly undefeated season in the 1980s, then went on to become the quarterback of the Miami Dolphins.

Danny Marino says of his father, Dan Sr., and the hometown ball field that now bears his name, "I learned the fundamentals of sports and fatherhood on that field. A dad who spends time with his son also becomes a friend." Jim visited the Marino family not long after Pitt lost a big game to Penn State that cost them the national championship. But Dan Sr. said, "Hey, he knows I'm not all wrapped up in what he's doing athletically, or that his athletic success is so important.... No matter what he does on that football field, I'm not gonna love him any more or less." Danny Marino's parents raised him the same way they raised his sisters, with love and support and sensible values, including a certain humility. His mother said, "I think what he has is something

God gave him. I just pray to God that he stays the same nice kid he is all his life.”¹

Fathers as well as mothers can make an enormous difference in the shape of their children’s lives, setting expectations not just for achievement but more importantly for character, and encouraging their children along the way.

A new animated film called *Inside Out* opened in theaters this weekend. It’s about the emotions inside the head of a young girl, with various actors doing the voices of Joy, Anger, Fear, Sadness, and Disgust. The movie gets great reviews and won a long standing ovation at the Cannes Film Festival. The producer and director both have girls of their own, and the producer called the film “a love letter to our daughters.” The director says a psychologist told him that there’s no one more socially in tune and aware than an 11-to-17-year-old girl; and the fathers who made the movie wanted to produce a fun, affectionate, and thoughtful picture of what goes on in the minds of many children, especially the young girls they love.

Honoring girls and women is the sort of thing fathers and men in general should do all the time, but in our world today many men do not. We hear about young men in fraternities getting coeds drunk or slipping them drugs in order to take advantage of them, and using social media to brag about their behavior. Some local teachers are in the news now for exploiting high school girls, taking advantage of the positions entrusted to them by the community. Meanwhile domestic violence, mostly against women, remains an epidemic in our country, largely hidden because

¹ Jim O’Brien, *Golden Arms* (Pittsburgh: James P. O’Brien Publishing, 2015), 233ff.

it occurs at home, but surfacing now and then when some athlete makes the headlines for treating women badly.

Much of the abuse perpetrated by men is against women, but it's not only women who suffer. A former Penn State football coach is in jail for abusing boys over many years, and now a former Speaker of the US House of Representatives is under investigation for trying to buy the silence of a young man he allegedly abused years ago as a high school teacher and wrestling coach.

Fathers in particular and men in general need to be role models for loving and honoring women and guiding and protecting young people. Men who abuse women or children are not masculine or tough or strong. They're just jerks, and sometimes they're also criminals, and other men need to hold them accountable. Far from condoning bad behavior, or looking the other way as if it was no concern of ours, men of character need to challenge those who threaten or harm other people.

A few years ago I visited Vietnam through Pittsburgh Seminary's World Mission Initiative, in what was coincidentally the fortieth anniversary of the year I was eligible for the draft. At one point I was sitting across the table from a local pastor that everyone called "VC" because he had once been part of the Communist Viet Cong. Had I met this man forty years earlier we would have been on opposite sides of a long and terrible war, but the circumstances of our lives can change dramatically between youth and maturity. One of the most striking things about Vietnam, to me, was how young people call middle-aged men "uncle" even when they are total strangers. The language itself captures the notion that older men are to be like uncles to everyone who is much younger than

themselves—that is, men they can look up to and depend upon, men from whom they can expect support and some degree of wisdom, rather than men they need to be afraid of.

In America we tend to be obsessed with youth. Many people want to look and act much younger than they are, which helps to account for the billions of dollars spent every year on personal appearance products, including what my brother used to call “Oil of Delay.” Youth may be enviable for its energy and enthusiasm, but it’s not often celebrated for its wisdom. Part of what age is for is so that, having learned some things from being around a while, we can pass along whatever wisdom we’ve accumulated to those who have not yet had the same experience.

It used to annoy me when some teenager at a restaurant or a movie theater would wonder if I qualified for the senior citizen discount, but lately I’ve come to embrace the notion of “uncle” that I discovered in Vietnam. All of us men who are older need to see ourselves as fathers or uncles or grandfathers to younger people in general.

If we’ve had children of our own, we’ve had some practice learning how to do that, but even if we don’t have children who share our immediate gene pool we still help to set the environment for all the younger people around us. They watch what we do, for better and for worse. If we condone bad behavior, or practice it ourselves, they learn to think those things are all right. On the other hand, if we try to be thoughtful and treat all people with respect, then boys and young men will admire that strength of character and want to become like that themselves, while girls and young women will learn to expect the men in their lives to treat them well too.

Young people need guidance, and too many of them are growing up without it. Last week a twenty-one-year-old white man, barely a man at all, went to a prayer meeting at an African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina, then pulled out a gun and announced that he had come to kill black people, and proceeded to do just that. Nine people died in a little gathering devoted to learning and doing the will of God. The youngest was 26, the oldest was 87. No doubt we'll learn more about the young man who committed this terrible crime, just like we always do when some young man pulls out a gun and kills a number of people more or less at random, as happens so often in America these days.

In the wake of the shooting, pundits will fill the air and the print media with predictable commentary, as they always do. Some will call once again for stricter rules on the sale of firearms while others repeat slogans like "Guns don't kill people; people kill people." A country already on edge over a string of inter-racial shootings will be reminded yet again that we have unfinished business over race in this country. Meanwhile, a mother whose son was murdered in that church in Charleston told the perpetrator in court, "You have killed some of the most beautiful people I know," and then she added, "May God have mercy on you"; and the daughter of an older woman who was killed said, "You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people, but God forgive you, and I will forgive you."

We need to do better about a lot of things in this country, and while that's everyone's responsibility, we men have an important role to play. When young men grow up learning bigotry and hatred, they often learn it from the men in their lives, or from their peers because there were no older men paying attention to them and showing them a better

way to live. When they think they have a right to treat people poorly, or act out their anger in violence, it's often because there were no men around to redirect them and model better behavior.

When women and children suffer abuse and violence it's overwhelmingly at the hands of men, and that needs to stop. Even if we're not the ones committing the abuses, we need to show and tell other men that it's not okay to do those things—not in a fraternity, not at school or on a football team, not at home or at work or anywhere else.

It's an easy thing to become a biological father. It's so much harder to become a moral or spiritual father, which is why so many men fall short in that regard, though it's something that every young person needs. We need to be the best fathers and men we can be, not only for our own children but for all the children around us, and for the sake of our society and the future of the world we live in.

Look at some of the things the Bible has to say about fathers and men. King David, who certainly had his share of faults, nevertheless learned from his experiences and from his life-long walk with God. At the end of his life, which was filled with all sorts of accomplishments as well as some colossal failures, he said to his son Solomon:

I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies ... so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn.

A thousand years later, in the New Testament letter to the Ephesians, the writer says, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.... And fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Jesus spoke of God again and again as his heavenly Father, and showed us something of God’s own character in the way he lived. When his disciples James and John apparently thought that part of the point of following Jesus was to gain advantages for themselves, sitting at his right and left hand in the kingdom of heaven, they not only annoyed the other disciples but prompted Jesus’ reminder that whoever would be great among them must serve the others, just as Christ came not to be served but to serve. Being a man in the image of God is about taking care of others and building other people up, not accumulating status and perks for ourselves.

Being a father is one of the greatest callings any man can have. Whether we have children of our own or simply serve as fathers at large to the young people around us, most of us will have a greater impact in that role than in anything else we do. You can excel in sports, or rise high in the business world, or become some sort of accomplished professional, but you’ll probably make less of a difference in any of those things than you will make through the character you model for the people around you. That’s especially true for the young people who watch the way you behave, looking for clues about how they themselves might learn to live.

One way or another, most of us men are going to be somebody’s father. Since that’s true, let us pray to God, the

Father of us all, for the wisdom and courage and strength and love to do it well.



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PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org