

SOME YEARS BACK, when I was a new pastor, I sat in a small-town café listening to a son of the church summarize his relationship with his father: “Nothing I did ever pleased him.” In his late twenties, the son was an embarrassment to his father. He was divorced with no steady job, and shunted week by week from one broken home to another, with the grandparents filling in the gaps. He came to church maybe Christmas and Easter. As we sat across the table from each other, his eyes revealed the dying embers of what once had been a flame of father-hunger—that hunger God places in the heart of every son.

Six years later another man began to attend church. He was married with a decent job and a houseful of children, but he spent weekends in bars, a hard-drinking womanizer. After attending worship for a time, he called mid-week asking me to pray that he would quit drinking. During our conversation he explained that he had become exactly what his father had predicted: “My father always told me I would never amount to anything. I was going to show him wrong, but he died on me.”

Back in the seventies when Harry Chapin sang “Cat’s in the Cradle,” the death of a child’s hunger for his father seared our nation’s conscience. Chapin’s lament was not a solitary one. I’ve spent decades listening to cultural celebrities mournfully recount their father-hunger. Here’s an account of a conversation with the actor and comedian David Spade:

“There were all the ingredients of a potentially happy childhood: two parents, Judy and Sam; David and two older brothers, Brian and Andy, all evenly spaced two years apart; and a nice home in Birmingham, Mich. What went wrong? “I was playing football with my dad,” Spade explained in his best deadpan, mock-serious manner. “He told me to go out for a pass. He yelled, ‘Go deeper! Deeper!’ Then he jumped in his dune buggy and drove away.” The actor waited a split second—perfect comedic timing—and then added seriously: “One day my dad just split. It was too much pressure—three kids, a wife and a job.” He paused, then added, “He would come around once or twice a year, but that was it.” This is our world: fathers split, and for the rest of their lives sons and daughters mourn their abandonment.

THE PAIN OF FATHER-HUNGER IS ALL AROUND US, shared by men and women alike. Comedians are often the guys most willing to be honest about our culture’s pains, so I’ve developed a habit of listening to them. Somewhere in his spiel the comedian will vomit the pain of his father-hunger, and I say “vomit” because listening to stories of fathers abandoning their sons is sickening. The disease has bloody and awful themes.

The most perceptive cope by telling shameful stories about their dads, following up the stories with wry one-liners. If the stories and jokes are good enough, they make a living out of it. Cynicism may not be the only way to mask father-hunger, but it does an okay job for millions. Masking pain won’t heal us, though; we must do the hard work of diagnosis and the harder work of treatment. Pain must direct our attention to the underlying disease.

Assuming God designed father-hunger to tell us something and lead us somewhere, we must ask what He is telling us and where He is leading us. As we ask these questions, though, keep in mind that father-hunger is never new. It’s as old as time. It’s the result of the sins of fathers, and the sins of fathers are at the center of man’s history. They stretch back domino-like to the very beginning. So despite the temptation to feel this way, you aren’t the sore thumb of history, solitary and splendid in your pain. You aren’t alone. Nor will you be able to deal with this pain by the usual means. Self-advancement won’t heal you. College, grad school, or seminary won’t resolve your inner conflict. Counseling won’t take it away, either. Medication may dull it, but not for long. Drinking, video games, and fantasy football drafts may take the edge off for a few hours, but when you wake up, late for work, the pain will still be there.

OUR HEAVENLY FATHER: The church’s earliest confession of faith is the Apostles’ Creed and it begins, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.” My own father—my earthly father—has been gone thirty years and I still miss him. But each Lord’s Day when we recite the Apostles’ Creed during worship and I stand shoulder to shoulder with my brothers and sisters in Christ confessing, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,” I confess I am not fatherless.

NO CHRISTIAN IS FATHERLESS, because God is our Father. Our earthly fathers die. If they were good fathers, it’s sad and we mourn them. Yet in our grief we remember the Father Almighty promises His sons and daughters, “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Jsh 1:5, NIV).² Near the beginning of *the Catechism for Young Children*, the father or mother asks their son or daughter the question, “Why should you glorify God?” The child is taught to respond, “Because He made me and takes care of me.” We initiate our children into this tender love of their heavenly Father by teaching them that God the Father made them and lovingly provides for all their needs.

God is our loving heavenly Father who made us and cares for us. He is the only one who can fill the aching void. And our heavenly Father is the only one who can “restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers” (Mal 4:6). It is Jesus Christ who gives us this restoration by his sacrifice on the cross for sin. Jesus Christ who was crucified, dead, and buried, rose again from the dead and He is reigning right now. He calls you to turn from your sins right now.

BEING A FATHER: True Christianity always restores the bond of love between fathers and children. It is not optional. Many of us don’t have a clue how to raise a son because we were never taught what manhood is. Thus fatherhood is mysterious and intimidating, particularly when we face raising a son. Nevertheless, life goes on. Marriages are vowed. Wives get pregnant, and about half of those who are born will look to their fathers to learn the nature of manhood, sonship, and fatherhood. Do you recognize the weight of fatherhood? Do you see the work cut out for you in becoming a father and teaching fatherhood to your son? Likely one of the reasons we are fearful of fatherhood is that we have come to recognize the sins and failures of our own fathers and we’re afraid we will repeat them. But realizing God is the Father from whom all fatherhood gets its name, we surely can’t be surprised that every man ever born has failed at this glorious task. That is, if failure is defined by our heavenly Father’s perfections. There’s a quote I’ve become fond of: “Children begin by loving their parents; as they grow older they judge them; sometimes they forgive them.”