

"Stuff My Dad Says"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, June 19, 2011

My daughter, Beckett, turned a year old just a few weeks ago. She is walking now and when you see her next, you'll likely conclude as we do that even at a year old, that child already seems determined – like she's on a mission. Along with her newfound footing are a lot more words scattered among the babbling. In my recollection, her *first* word was at about six months. It was "ahbba," which means "father" in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. But of course language and meaning is really all about context, and as someone very clearly pointed out to me, Beckett was likely not speaking Aramaic. And that based on her family situation and heritage, her first word was probably referring to beloved Swedish rock band *ABBA*. Either way, of course, we are still quite impressed with her.

Jill and I are fortunate to have two amazing father figures in Beckett's life. Beckett was brought into this world with the assistance of a dear friend of ours and his partner. And although this relationship may be more complicated for us to explain than most, I would argue that all relationships are more complicated than they appear, and emphasize that it was important to us for Beckett to know and have a relationship with her father. And she does.

Even though Beckett has and lives with two mommies, she learned to say "Dada" first. Some speech pathologists argue that saying Dada first is actually the sign of a happy baby; they argue that the "mmmmm" sound in "mmmamma" comes from experiencing frustration, and so if they haven't had a lot of frustration in their lives, they suggest they would have the "mmmmm" sound until after the "da" sound. She has plenty of frustration in her life now, no worries. And she can say "mmmamma" just fine. Whatever her level of frustration, I can guarantee that Dada, and even Ahbba, that dominant cultural reference of God the Father, will likely continue to have a significant impression on Beckett as she discovers who she is, both separate from and in relationship to God and the men in her life.

My relationship to God and to the men in my life was greatly impacted by my own father. So that you might relate to him generationally, let me tell you: my father was born in 1950. I know a large number of you just got lost in the realization that you are old enough to be my parent or even grandparent...stay with me. So my dad grew up in Oklahoma City on the near north side, and graduated from Classen High School. That means he was a freshman when the Beatles made their debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and so his high school years were defined by the progression and phenomenon of the Beatles and their music.

He learned to play the guitar in his teens and began writing music, which is how he wooed my mother. By 1967, the Beatles had released *Sgt. Pepper's*, the country was in the midst of the Vietnam War, and my father had joined the Navy. My father never saw combat; he was on a ship that sailed to Korea, and spent a lot of time in Oakland. In 1972, after some very careful planning, my father left the military to return to Oklahoma at 22, married and with a brand new baby. My parents were just kids themselves. They returned to Oklahoma, bought a house with a VA loan, and my dad turned his medical training from the service into a steady job as a Pulmonary Technologist. But every aspect of their home life and my father's time away from work centered around music.

My parents were in a rock band together – don't picture ABBA here, it was more like a cross between Steely Dan and Heart. My father played lead guitar and sang, and my mother sang. For much of my early childhood, I went to sleep at night with band rehearsal in the next room. I remember at two or three, standing on a chair in front of a microphone, singing "Ricky don't lose that number..." One of my favorite pictures of me as a child is of my father and I sitting on the floor (orange shag carpet, of course), my dad in his own Sgt. Pepper phase – long hair and mustache. He has perched on his lap a beautiful old Gibson Acoustic, and I am about four, sitting cross-legged with my first guitar: a kid-sized plastic guitar decorated with the stars and stripes, like most things were in 1976.

My father did not fit into many of the stereotypical dad boxes: he expressed his emotions pretty well, was always affectionate. He was good with his hands, I guess, if it was with a guitar, but just about anything else he would take apart would pretty much

stay disassembled, because he wasn't very good at putting things back together. He did work while my mom stayed home in my early childhood, but he did not have any gender-specific expectations of me. When I think of things my dad said to me as a young child, the most memorable and oft-repeated phrase was, "Engage your brain before engaging your mouth." I'm still working on this one. And let me say that we often teach what we need to learn ourselves. My memories of my father included many times when he could have taken his own advice.

My dad sometimes didn't appreciate roles of authority in his life, and he definitely devalued superficial conversation, so his commentary on authority and superficiality was often an under-his-breath, "Quack!" If you didn't know him, you might think he was pretty nutty when he would quack seemingly out of nowhere. I also heard phrases like, "You are cruisin' for a bruisin'," and, "You are walking on thin ice, young lady." But my dad would also tell me bedtime stories; my favorite were stories about him when he was a kid.

We learn a lot from the father figures in our lives; what they say, and what they don't say. How we relate to them often shapes how we understand what a man is, what a father is, and how to relate to the men in our lives. I was very fortunate to have a father who spent time with me as a child, and who was truly interested in how I experienced the world. The message that was clearly delivered to me was that I could be anything I wanted to be...that I could do anything I wanted to do in this world.

He related to me not just as a kid, but also as a person, with an assumption that we were both on a spiritual journey in this world. My father's spiritual journey involved a deep love for Jesus, and later an eastern influence of Buddhism...and don't forget John Lennon. It is clear to me now that his attraction to Buddhism resonates with his understanding of Life as Suffering, and his need to still his very active mind. And his attraction to Jesus is about a message of relentless love and redemption. His adoration of John Lennon stems from their shared desire to express life's meaning lyrically, and Lennon's deeply felt and expressed experience of the world.

When I was about eight, my father sat down with me and explained, quite calmly and matter-of-factly, that although he loved my mother, they could not live together, so he would be moving out. I was assured that he still loved me and I would still see him, but that they would not be living in the same house. It was not presented as sad or terrible, and I did not experience it as such. I would learn much later from my dad that his divorce from my mom was not just about their compatibility; it was also about his own ego trip. He told me that he wanted to be a rock star, and that he didn't think he could do that without leaving my mother and me.

He said it didn't take him long before he knew he had made a huge mistake. My mother had moved on; and so my dad began dating, and it wasn't long before he met and married his second wife. I felt like I had lucked out: I had two families who got along fairly well, and who were both invested in me. My mother and father worked hard to stay friends. We had meals together and celebrated significant events in my life together.

In 1985, my father and his new wife had a son. I was thirteen, so my brother hardly has memories of me before I could drive. So my sister role was much more like an aunt; I would just spoil him and give him back. Because he and I got along so well and he looked up to me so much, I was the person my stepmother would threaten my brother with if he wouldn't do something. She'd say, "Don't make me call your sister." During my brother's childhood, my dad's music became less social and more solo. He would spend hours in his recording studio with headphones on, layering tracks on top of one another. He is an outstanding lyricist and musician. My brother and I connect most around my dad through that music – it is through my father's lyrics that we learned about what mattered most to him. We were very fortunate, through his music, to have a direct view into his heart and to how he saw the world.

My brother and I both learned to play guitar. We were both in and out of bands, and would share music that we loved or had written as a way to reach out to our dad. Even though music connected us, my brother and I have very different experiences of our father growing up. *My father* had literally *grown up* – when he had my brother he was in his 30s, and he was a different husband and a different father. But something else had

a profound impact on our differing experiences of my father: my brother has very few memories of my father before he was sick.

My father was dealt a pretty bad hand health-wise. In his thirties he was diagnosed with epilepsy, and then soon after he was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis at a time before they really had the kinds of drugs they have now to keep the symptoms at bay. At forty he battled kidney cancer and had a kidney removed, and in his fifties had a stint put in his heart. I have been amazed at his resiliency and his deeply ingrained sense of gratitude. My dad's default personality, whether it be coming out of a seizure or coming back into awareness from surgery, most often begins with "thank you." He jokes with the staff and manages to make friends wherever he is, but these illnesses have taken a toll on his body and have deeply affected his means of communication. About six years ago, my stepmother finally realized she could no longer care for him on her own, and he is now at the VA facility in Norman.

But some things have remained consistent through his parenting of both of us during different decades of his life. He has always been interested in our journeys, much more curious than judgmental, displayed by what he does and doesn't say. I remember when I came out to my father; I called him on the phone to tell him (I was living in Dallas at the time) and I remember that conversation very clearly: there was a silence, I assume he was taking it in, and then he said, "Do you love her?" I said yes, and he said, "Then I can't wait to meet her." My father has taught my brother and I to value our relationships to those people we love above everything else.

So once a month I drive from here to Oklahoma City and pick up my brother, now twenty-six, and we drive to Norman together to visit my dad. We usually go in the morning, because he is less tired and more easily able to communicate. For a while now, it has really mostly been my brother and I who best understand him. We can see the relief come across his face as he struggles to get out a few words and we assist by finishing the thought for him out loud. He can no longer play the guitar or write things down, but we still manage to connect around music. I play tracks for him on my iPhone of me singing some of his old songs; my brother talks about his latest adventures with his punk band. As I have gotten older and my dad has gotten sicker, I dug deep into my

dad's experience of the world. He didn't become the famous rock star he wanted to be, but he is our rock star. But what has persisted throughout everything is his common refrains: of how proud he is of my brother and I, and how lucky he has been for loving and being loved by two amazing women.

In a sense, I have been watching my father die slowly. He remembers less and less, and is less able to communicate as time passes. And it is a tragedy. But he still has moments of clarity. I showed him a picture of Beckett recently on a trip when I did not bring her along, and he shook his head, picking up on Beckett's determination and orneriness, and he managed to get out one very clear sentence: "Ohhh, you're gonna be in trouble." Followed by a big grin. I am still learning from what my father says and doesn't say about his life and his struggle with his health.

My father has tremendously affected my experience of the Holy just by being open religiously to multiple understandings of God, and by his default assumption that this life is in fact a spiritual one for everyone. I choose to apply what I love about my dad to that male language about God when I hear it in a prayer or a song. It helps me relate to think of God as Father – proud of his children, with a short memory for others' mistakes and a long memory of love. It helps me relate to a father God who believes in me as much as I believe in him, who I connect more deeply to through music, and who sometimes needs me to finish his sentences, tell his story, and be his hands in the world.

When my dad was stationed in California as a young man before I was born, he nearly drowned trying to push himself to swim laps underwater in his apartment pool. He spoke to me often about that experience in his life. Because of it, he was fascinated with the Tibetan Book of the Dead. He said while he was passed out underwater, before my mother and another woman pulled him out, he blacked out underwater and said he had a vision of two very different worlds: one dark and dreary world, devoid of emotion, full of empty surface-level pleasures, and another full of light and depth and love. He said he felt in that moment he had a very clear choice to make. He chose love, and woke up coughing and gasping for breath on the said of the pool, back in this life.

We learn from the father figures in our life not only by what they say and how they interact with us, but also by how they live their lives. The choices they make and how they spend their time; their way of connecting to those whom they love and how they treat strangers; when they show up and when they don't; what they say and what they don't say.

What does your life say to the next generation, who is watching very closely? If you are fortunate enough to have time left with the father figures in your life, take some time this day and tell them how they have influenced you. If you are not directly influenced by a child in your life, consider getting involved as a mentor in our Partners in Education program here at the church, or in our Children's or Youth Department. As Beckett will likely argue much later in her life, you can't have too many dads.

Happy Father's Day.