

“Fatherly Hospitality”
By Rev. Jefferson Cox
5th Sunday After Pentecost
Fathers’ Day
June 15, 2008

I believe that the whole Christian Church is in a crisis as more and more of its men, especially fathers, are missing. There are many families in which only the mother and the children attend Sunday worship as the father stay home or participates in other activities. There are many fathers in our society that the last thing they want to do on the morning of Fathers Day is to go to Church. It might be easy to point the fingers at those men who are missing, and criticize them for their absence, but I believe that such an attitude would overlook that main culprit in this trend, and that is the Christian Church itself.

Why would I say this? Let me ask you a series of questions. What are you more likely to find in a church, a doily lying on a credenza, or a trophy bass mounted on a wall? What kind of movie would you most likely associate with congregational life, a sappy “chick flick” focused on deeply felt feelings or an action-adventure film focused on far-away missions of daring-do? What man is most likely to be found in church, Mr. Rogers or James Bond? What group is most likely to gather at a church, a women’s circle or a men’s fellowship group?

As another way of illustrating my point, let’s watch a short scene from the Disney/Pixar movie, *The Incredibles*. The man in the scene is the superhero Frozone, who (along with all of the other superheroes) has been forced into retirement by a society more willing to sue them for damages than to cheer them on. But then, Oh no! A killer robot has been unleashed on the city!! (Clip shows a scene in which Frozone attempts to locate his supersuit and deal with the reluctance of his wife to help him find it, as she fears that he won’t be able to keep their dinner plans if he goes out to help the city.)

The statistics show that the percentage of men, including fathers, in congregations is steadily dropping. Why is this? I believe it’s because the Church has tried to hide men’s supersuits. By and large the Western Christian Church values safety, security, and predictability over change, fun, and taking risks. How much does the Church resist change? Remember those people in that Lutheran congregation in Maine who were murdered a few years back by arsenic in their coffee? The man who did it was upset that they were talking about merging with another congregation. This emphasis on safety, security, and predictability is not restricted to mainline denominations either.

The Christian radio station Z88.3 specifically reaches out to evangelical listeners with its Contemporary Christian music. What is the slogan for Z88.3? “Safe for the little ears,” i.e. the little ears on the children in the minivan being driven around by mom, and so the music is selected to appeal to that mother. If other people, such as older adults, single men, a young married couple without kids, end up listening to the station, so much the better, but that’s not their primary audience.

The problem isn’t restricted to men, either. Young adults of both genders often feel the same frustrations. Think about a child growing up in a church. When they’re infants and toddlers, there’s the nursery. When their in grade school, they have Sunday School. When they’re teenagers there’s Confirmation and Youth Group. But when the

graduate high school, what is in the Church specifically for them? And if they go off to college, they're very unlikely to attach themselves to a faith community, probably because they fear that they'll just be told what not to do, instead of being given opportunities to use their growing knowledge and skills, along with their faith, to make a difference in the world.

So is it any wonder that there are so many fathers and young adults missing from the Western Church? But what about Salem? How are we doing in being hospitable to men in general and fathers in particular? Well, there's not a men's group, but then again, the women's circle at Salem is smaller than at most Lutheran churches, so that might be a general Salem problem. Sports are mentioned in the pulpit on a fairly regular basis. There are opportunities for people to use their gifts and talents to make a difference in the world.

On the other hand, until recently there has only been one traditional gathering of men here at Salem, but where does it happen? The kitchen, on Easter morning! And how have we traditionally celebrated Mother's Day at Salem? We bring mothers up to the Communion rail for a special blessing from their children. How have we been recognizing fathers on Fathers Day? We make them stand up and promise before God and everyone to be good fathers. See the difference?

As I prepared our order of service this day, I considered doing away with the promise section of the Benediction at the end of the service, but then I thought to myself "I expect that Christian Men aren't afraid to stand up and make promises before God to be good fathers," so I left that part in.

So what can we do to make our congregation more hospitable to fathers, men, and young adults of both genders? We can take their supersuits out of hiding, and offer more active projects that allow them to make a difference in the world. We can make room for fathers to take an active part in the faith development of their children. We can embrace the excitement and fun that change brings to a congregation. We can coach our men to be leaders of progress, innovation, and excellence in the world. And as for today, even Fathers ought to be blessed by their children, so I now invite the other fathers who are here with their children to join me at the communion rail with their children so that we too can be blessed.