

A sermon preached on June 21st, 2020 – "Father's Day" – based upon Matthew 10:1-5a; 7-9, 11-14; 24-26; 28-31 entitled, "Father Wounds and the Deep Healing into Which Jesus Would Lead Us."

It was an odd group of men that Jesus called to be his disciples.

There wasn't much to suggest they'd make particularly promising candidates to assume leadership positions in his new movement. One of them we are told would end of betraying him.

The most striking thing about these group of men was their diversity: they came from a range a backgrounds including simple fishermen, a taxcollector, and a political zealot.

These last two are worth pausing over. Matthew the taxcollector and Simon the Zealot came from opposite ends of the political spectrum of Jewish men of that day: As a taxcollector, Matthew would have been someone who advocated for peaceable compliance with the authority of the Romans. In contrast, Simon the Zealot had been someone looking for the violent overthrow of the Roman authorities.

With this being Father's Day, it occurred to me that one way to view the relationship of Jesus to his disciples is that of a father to his sons – or rather, as that of man of far greater maturity mentoring other men on how to be a man. And perhaps getting along with men quite different from themselves was part of what was involved in this special mentoring.

I'll return to what Jesus taught this odd group of men in a little while, but first I want to take on the difficult challenge of speaking to the deep division that afflicts our troubled nation.

We all acknowledge ours is a troubled nation, but people on the right and the left tend to locate the focal point of the trouble in different places.

When people on the left look for the outstanding example of what is presently wrong with our country they turn their attention to the reality of "bad cops" – police officers who brutally abuse their authority, with black men as the all too common object of this abuse – and to the system that enables bad cops to get away with their bad behavior.

In contrast, people on the right tend to focus their attention on a general lack of respect for authority and the destructive forces this can unleash. They focus in particular on certain young men – often, though not exclusively black young men – who view a peaceful protest as an opportunity to throw bricks at policemen doing their difficult job – young men who break into stores and commit theft and arson -- wreaking havoc on the economy that could potentially provide them with a job.

As is so often the case in our polarized society, we are pressured to choose a side: focus on the violent rioter or the abusive cop -- condemn one side and give a pass to the other.

So here is the observation I would offer in the hope of finding some common ground: If we could look deeply into the lives of these two categories of people – people who on the surface seem altogether different – I believe we would find a surprising commonality, a similar profound woundedness -- one that some have called a “father wound.” This particular wound can be caused either by the total absence of fathering or positive male role models -- or by the presence of fathers who inflicted deep emotional wounds, providing distinctly destructive models of what it means to be a man.

On the surface the cop who murdered George Floyd and others like him project an image of hyper-masculinity. They carry around inside them a destructive image of what a “real man” is all about – one likely passed on to them by their own deeply-wounded father.

In this distorted version of manhood the only emotion that is allowed to be expressed is anger. A so-called “real man” doesn’t acknowledge fear, or vulnerability, or grief, or for that matter tenderness. A “real man” sees life and human interaction as a constant battle for domination in which the worst possible outcome would be to come out a “loser.” He is attracted to positions of authority like that of a police officer because it provides him opportunity to be in a position of dominance over others, and dominance is what he sees life as being all about.

This image of a “real man” is, of course fraudulent – it’s all a big act -- because just like everybody else, there really is fear, and grief, and vulnerability inside such a man – it’s simply part of what it means to be a human being. This “real man” image is deeply destructive, not only for the people the man interacts with – women, children and other men -- but also for the man himself because when we bury feelings of sadness and fear deep inside us they get turned into rage and depression and an inability to feel compassion towards others, or for that matter, joy. And it is only in acknowledging what is inside us that we can have truly intimate relationships, so the supposed “real man” ends up very, very lonely.

The so-called “real man” likes to pride himself on his “freedom” – the fact that he doesn’t allow others to have dominion over him – but what he’s really experiencing is bondage -- because he carries the burden of constantly having to prove his manhood – to seek revenge, for instance for any perceived “disrespect” he receives.

So the hyper macho cop is really a deeply wounded person -- wounded probably by his own similarly wounded father -- but also to some extent by a culture that often contributes to this warped view of a “real man”.

Turning now to the other focal point for the problems of the present crisis, it is well documented that in recent decades there has been a rise of single parent households where too often there has been an abdication by fathers of their responsibility to help raise their children, a problem that has particularly afflicted the portion of the black community that lives in poverty. I

To quote former President Barack Obama, too many black fathers *"have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. We know the statistics — that children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of schools and 20 times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral problems, or run away from home or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it."*

As Obama indicated, there has to be accountability among black fathers who fail to step up to the plate. But we who are white are also morally obliged to acknowledge the long brutal history of racism in America that has contributed mightily to this problem, a history we have been all too reluctant to acknowledge.

Oftentimes a single mother can heroically channel what you might call enough masculine and feminine energy to successfully raise up her son.

More often, though when a boy grows up without a father in the home or positive male role models close at hand, he grows up with a wounded soul -- with a deep, often unacknowledged grief. In the absence of a positive role model, his woundedness resembles that of the bad cop with the abusive father that gets expressed in a persistent insecurity and feelings of fraudulence regarding the adequacy of his manhood.

Never having experienced a loving father whose authority was worthy of respect, the young man views all authority with suspicion. Perhaps he turns to other fatherless, deeply wounded young men who bond together in violent gangs in a desperate search for an image of masculinity to guide them, one similarly hyper-masculine and deeply destructive as that of the bad cop.

So I have this fantasy that if you could bring the bad cop and the young, violent rioter into the same room and somehow get them to feel safe enough to share their deep inner wounds with one another, they would find a brother in one another.

So let's turn back now to Jesus and the model of manhood he set for his disciples.

In the context of a society that rigidly separated men from women, with men believing themselves to be superior to and entitled to domination of women Jesus modelled a willingness to associate with women in a way that broke taboos, treating them with respect, and advocating for justice on their behalf. For instance, that's what his

prohibition of divorce was about – he was rejecting the idea that women were the property of men – a property they could dispose of when they chose, leaving them utterly destitute on the streets.

In a society that had rigid definitions of the roles and proper behavior of men and women, Jesus lived out a striking blend of what are traditionally thought of as masculine and feminine qualities.

On the masculine side, Jesus carried with him an undeniable sense of personal power and inner authority. When he spoke, this inner authority compelled people to pay attention. He had the capacity to stand tall and speak his truth courageously, unapologetically -- shaping the world around him as he did.

Jesus possessed a strong sense of adventure, spending most of his time travelling -- crossing seas and confronting bullies.

He didn't avoid conflict. He could get angry at times, but his anger wasn't that of a loose cannon. There was always a reason that justified his anger.

The willingness to engage in competition is traditionally seen as a masculine quality, and when his opponents wanted to debate him in the hope of taking him down, Jesus readily took them, prevailing with his superior wisdom.

But there were also qualities Jesus possessed that were -- especially in his day -- thought of as distinctly feminine.

His emotional range included grief – he openly, unashamedly wept, and said those who grieved were blessed.

He was nurturing. When little children were brought to him and his disciples tried to keep them away, they did so in part because attending to little children was seen as women's work. Jesus startled them by tenderly taking them up into his arms to hold in his lap. He was a healer, a reconciler, a man of great compassion.

And although he was willing to compete, he made it absolutely clear that life isn't about domination -- it's about being of service. He said that if you want to be a leader and take on the mantle of authority you must first be a servant of all, which is to say that everyone you lead should know how much you care about them -- how much you are willing to sacrifice on their behalf.

There is at least one instance – in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he died – when Jesus openly acknowledged being afraid. Jesus talked a lot about fear and the need for faith to triumph over fear, but he didn't pretend there was nothing in life of which to be afraid. Rather he modelled a lifestyle of facing one's fears directly with courage.

If we look at the instructions from this morning's reading that Jesus gave the twelve men he was mentoring as he sent them out into the world to do what they had witnessed him doing, we see this same blend of traditionally masculine and feminine qualities.

He sent them out on a great adventure, instructing them to have confidence in the power with which they had been endowed to be healers and in the message they had been entrusted with regarding how God's Kingdom is at hand.

But he intentionally sent them out without the things one might use to try to dominate others – without money, weapons, or status symbols. In doing so, he forced them to let go of control and embrace vulnerability and face their fears. They would have to rely on the kindness and hospitality of strangers, while at the same time trusting that they were worthy of that kindness and hospitality because of the blessing their presence brought to the homes they visited.

He warned that at some houses they would experience rejection, but when doors were slammed in their faces, they were not to respond by breaking open the door and beating the crap out of the people who disrespected them – no they were to calmly proceed on to the next home.

They were to be about building relationships of trust where strangers become friends where together they could experience God's grace and the nearness of God's kingdom.

And when he talked about God as "Father" – the term he used stunned people for its tenderness: "Abba", the Aramaic word best translated "Daddy".

The woundedness I've been talking about in the violent rioter and the abusive cop is, I would suggest an extreme form of a woundedness we all share in to some extent.

None of us received perfect parenting, and all of us live in a society that wounds us, leading us to feelings of self-loathing for various perceived inadequacies. All of us are broken in some way. As Father Richard Rohr puts it " *If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it—usually to those closest to us: our family, our neighbors, our co-workers, and, invariably, the most vulnerable, our children.*"

I've been talking about Jesus mentoring men; but really he is here to mentor and heal all human beings. True wholeness is to be like Jesus.

Check out the verse from Genesis: when it tells us that we are made in the image and likeness of God, it says there are both masculine and feminine qualities in the divine.

Jesus said in this morning's reading, "*nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.*"

Deep inside all of us are parts of ourselves that have been hidden away. Partly this was because these parts of ourselves were seemed too painful to face. But there are also parts that have been hidden away because, perhaps we didn't feel ourselves worthy to embrace them, or the world discouraged us from claiming them.

Imagine yourself sitting on the lap of Jesus and in the all-encompassing knowledge of God he channels a transformation begins to happen. That which is painful to face becomes something that links you to all others. A greater wholeness begins to emerge as you claim parts of yourself you've felt unworthy to embrace.

For a woman this might involve claiming your God's given power and authority as a beloved child of the Creator. For a man this may involve rejecting damaging images of manhood and embracing more traditionally feminine qualities: perhaps a greater access to those feelings we've felt compelled to flee from, or perhaps a greater capacity to work cooperatively.

Every human being is utterly unique, and I cannot tell you what the journey towards wholeness will mean for you. But what I can tell you is that Jesus is here to be your guide in this journey.