"The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother."
—Theodore Hesburgh

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Why Bother With Fathers?

American singer/songwriter Billy Joel, 60, is getting divorced—again. He and his third wife, former Top Chef host Katie Lee, 27, are splitting after five years of marriage. The reasons for their divorce—some say infidelity, some say their age difference—are unclear, but Joel's daughter, Alexa Ray, 23, says that she knew that the couple was having problems, so the breakup came as no surprise to her.

In providing background for the story, the entertainment pages of various media outlets invariably list Joel's marital résumé. For instance, The Miami-Herald reports typically, "It's the third marriage for Joel, 60, who was first married to his business manager, Elizabeth Weber, and then to model Christie Brinkley, with whom he has his only daughter, Alexa Ray." What unfortunately immediately came to mind—totally unbidden—was the thought of a horse pedigree: "Secretariat, son of Bold Ruler, out of Somethingroyal."

It was one of those instant associations that often provide insight—if not only to one's own mental state—to the world as it really is. First impressions can be frequently spot on because they are flash evaluations uncolored by subsequent rationalizations, also known as second guesses. At that moment, a person sees things as they are presented right then. In this case, that so many Americans live in yours-mine-and-ours households—not to mention single-parent households due to the dual family scourges of illegitimacy and divorce—is fleetingly reminiscent of the temporary liaisons between studs and brood mares.
While this may seem offensive, it has biblical backing, believe it or not. In Jeremiah 13:27, God castigates Judah, particularly the royal family: "I have seen your adulteries and your lustful neighing, the lewdness of your harlotry, your abominations on the hills in the fields. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! Will you still not be made clean?" Jeremiah seems to be fond of this image, as he uses it again in Jeremiah 5:8: "They were like well-fed lusty stallions; every one neighed after his neighbor's wife." Clearly, God is portraying people—who should know better—following their base drives like brute animals.

As steeped in Judeo-Christian values as it is, America is a nation that should know better, yet for at least three generations, the sanctity of marriage has steadily declined among its people until today, when divorce is routine and illegitimacy is commonplace. Back in my grandfather’s day, divorce was still shameful, and most families did not want their sons or daughters marrying a divorced person. However, as society secularized, divorce lost its stigma until no-fault divorce laws swept across the nation. According to the Centers for Disease Control, 20% of marriages are disrupted after five years and one-third of marriages after ten years. As of 2005, the current divorce rate is 3.6 per 1,000 population, while the marriage rate is 7.5 per 1,000, meaning that half of marriages end in divorce.

Further, only in six states—Hawaii, Illinois, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Utah—can someone sue for damages on the basis of alienation of affection in cases of adultery. Most states have recognized that adultery is so commonplace today that a person entering a marriage should expect it to be corrupted by an outside sexual liaison. Caveat emptor now applies to the marriage transaction too.

Another worrying trend is that of women opting for single-motherhood, much as the fictional Murphy Brown did in the sitcom of the same name during the 1991-92 season. It is bad enough when women in their late thirties or early forties, seeing their window of childbearing closing fast, decide to have a child without the benefit of marriage (a category that has grown by 145% since 1980). But it is far worse when young women begin to make the same "lifestyle choice" in their early-to-mid twenties. These days, about 40% of live births in this nation are to single mothers, and in about half of these cases, the mothers are entirely on their own. How many of these young mothers are single mothers by choice is difficult to quantify, but a September 17, 2008, article in The Guardian (U.K.) reports that, there as in this country, "a growing number of young women are now turning to artificial insemination and embracing single motherhood."

In all of these situations, the disposable factor seems to be the father. Society's definition of fatherhood seems to be dwindling toward the idea of sperm donation and little more. The father might be replaced—omot, depending on the whim of the mother.
As one of the young British women in The Guardian article commented about her daughter, "I think there are some children who grow up perfectly well without male role models—and she has got my father, my brother and my nephew." Who needs a husband and a father? Any man, whatever the relation, will do.

God did not create the family to work this way. He is very clear in Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Here, He establishes the marriage relationship as the basis of the family. He declares in Malachi 2:16 that He hates divorce, a statement echoed by Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 19:6-9.

In the seventh commandment, God forbids sexual activity outside of marriage (Exodus 20:14). Later, in such places as Deuteronomy 23:2. He places the stigma on illegitimacy: "One of illegitimate birth shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD." He wanted His people to be a nation of whole families because they produced the best products for the benefit of the nation. It is clear from the situation before the Flood that men taking "wives for themselves of all whom they chose" did not produce a cohesive, peaceful society (Genesis 6:2).

This desire for stable families is codified in the fifth of the Ten Commandments: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12). Like mothers, fathers are a vital part of the equation whose sum is a well-rounded, secure individual. True, not all fathers are good fathers, and God makes provisions for such cases in His principles on divorce, but more often than not, a father in the home creates a better environment for the raising of children than a home that lacks one. And the more the home's father and mother love each other and expand their love to their children, the better the environment becomes.

Here in the United States, this Sunday is Father's Day. As we honor our fathers and husbands, take a moment to consider their importance to the family and to society. It is hoped that it will heighten our gratitude, not only for our human fathers, but our Father in heaven, who really does know best.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

Parenting (Part 2): Fathers
by Richard T. Ritenbaugh
Richard Ritenbaugh stresses that a major part of our spiritual responsibility is to become a parent as God is. The world's society, steeped in evolutionary humanism and feminist polemic, has greatly denigrated the role of the father. Unfortunately, these attitudes, hating anything patriarchal or undemocratic, have seeped into the church. Patriarchy is family organization with the father having ultimate authority. The husband's role, centered in love and concern, should not be abusive, domineering, or authoritarian. He is to provide instruction about God's ways, leadership, guidance, and selfless sacrifice. God-spouse-children is the proper family order of priority. Turning this priority around has fostered the basest of social aberrations in our society.

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Father Knows Best
by Mike Ford

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