

moral perspectives
Rev. David Strong

Father: rule maker vs. parent

FATHERS, Father's Day: What do the words mean? All of us have fathers. Each of us has a different view of what fathers are.

Conservatives define fatherhood as the admonition to honor and obey your father. They believe that fathers set the laws. Sons and daughters are to obey the rules or face punishment. They like to quote a letter by Ricardo Montalban to his son: "As long as you live in this house you will follow the rules... I am not your pal, I am your father... you will do in this house as I say."

A QUITE DIFFERENT approach begins with the fact that Jesus called God father. He used a word that literally means "DADA." Jesus shocked the conservatives suggesting that our relationship with God is like that of a baby to a parent. The word stresses intimacy and immediacy.

The story Jesus told that best defines fatherhood is the parable of the prodigal son. The focus is upon the father's attitude toward two very different sons.

Jesus' image of a father is not one of rules or of punishments. It is a father who loves, forgives and with each of his sons seeks their love in turn. The theme of the story is to show two contrasting ways in which sons respond to the love and acceptance of their father.

THE TRAGEDY of the conservative view of fatherhood is that it coincides with destructive, cultural views of fatherhood. The current image of the male is that it is important to have children but not to father them.

According to Marc Pastreau, in his book "The Male Machine," "The image of a lawyer, businessman, or even a professor wheeling a baby carriage around in public is still startling. Men who spend a lot of time taking care of their children — washing, dressing, feeding, teaching, comforting and playing with them — aren't doing quite what they should be."

He adds, "It is a diversion from men's real work, the building of a successful career."

Few models are available today for rewarding relationships between fathers and their children. The images still suggest that women care for babies and children. Men build their careers and the closest they get to fathering may be with their dog. The traditional, cultural role of fathers making rules and meting out punishments no longer works. Neither the children nor the father believes he has this authority.

I BELIEVE that most fathers want to be close to their children. Many lack the sense of how to do this.

I believe that first and of most importance is our love for our children. Fathers are parents as much as mothers are parents.

I find that one important element of fatherhood is to set up expectations for my children. I tell them that I expect them to do the best and seek the highest goals in their lives. I try to live out in my own life what I teach them.

I encourage my children by telling them that when they are motivated from within themselves I know that they will do well. I want them to become increasingly independent, but I also let them know that I am always here to support them.

FATHERS NEED to do some spiritual and emotional evaluation of their own lives before they pass their unlovely characteristics on to their children.

We know that many of us fathers have become victims of our own toughness and competition. Is this what it means to be a father?

Fathers' Day should be a time to rethink what it means to be a father. Men and women alike need to assist in the changes that will make us men more like the father in the story of the prodigal son.

The Rev. David Strong is the pastor of St. Matthew United Methodist Church in Livonia.

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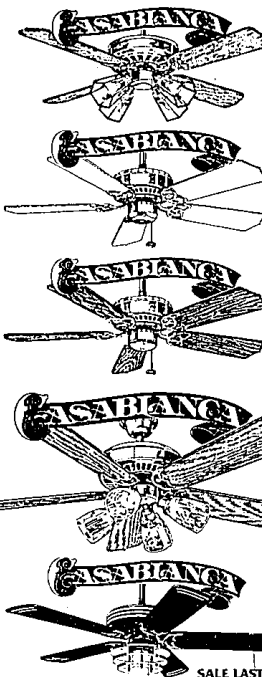
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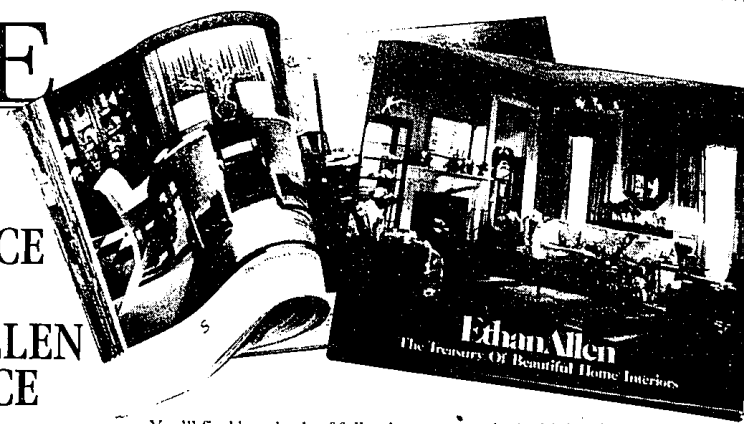
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