

Cat's In The Cradle

Sermon text by Noël Lemen - June 17, 2018

You know, I still can't listen to that song without getting choked up. I heard it for the first time when I was 11, and I didn't actual know where my Father was. Honestly, I don't know where he is today. You see, my childhood was.... Non-traditional, to say the least. Which, let me tell you, makes it very odd-feeling to be doing our service on Father's Day, but that's what I get for not actually looking at *why* that date was open!

And yet... I think maybe this is the right service for me to do. Because parenting doesn't come with a manual. I mean, wouldn't it be great if they handed you a Concise Scientific Manual for the Care and Training of Your Offspring at the hospital along with the reams of other paperwork? But I didn't get one, and if you did... well.... You are overdue to share with the rest of the class.

Of course, we sort of did get one... our own parents. And that can be good or bad. You see- and this is me simplifying years of psychology into about 2 minutes- for purposes of learning, you can divide your brain into 3 parts. Your forebrain is the one we think of as The Brain. It's where our logic centers and rational decisions stem from. Think of it as "person brain." Hindbrain? Now, that's lizard-brain. That's base survival instinct. It's what keeps your breathing while you're asleep, and makes you vomit when you've eaten bad Chinese. But mid-brain... midbrain is what we're going to talk about, because mid-brain is mammal brain and it's all instinct and training. It's the one that ties your shoes, makes your cup of coffee in the morning on auto-pilot, and jerks you back onto the sidewalk just before that car speeds by.

Where does this tie into parenting? Because I'll tell you a secret: your forebrain doesn't run nearly as much of the show as you think it does. And when you're stressed, upset, or otherwise not-calm, it runs even less because it basically shuts down. Adrenaline up- logic circuits down. That's where the template of your parents comes in- when our parents interacted with us as children, they trained us- they created a template in our heads for how parenting works.

So you can have the best intentions, the best research and knowledge and parenting books and know EXACTLY how you're going to handle those 2 year old tantrums... until they happen, and you're on 4 hours of sleep, forgot to eat lunch because you were doing emergency potty training laundry, and just need to get these last 2 errands run before your spouse gets home and suddenly there's a screaming toddler in the middle of Publix and all of your good intentions and parenting books are out the window and you find yourself raging at them
Just.Like.Your.Dad.

Welcome to the midbrain.

And there's more fun to it than that.

We've all heard the Hodenosaunee saying that when making decisions, we have to take into account the past 7 generations, and the next 7 to come. Well, psychohistorians- yes, that's a real field- are discovering that the Hodenosaunee were far wiser than we gave them credit for. Transgenerational trauma is what happens when trauma passes itself along like the world's worst family hitchhiker. It passes itself through family stories, and the way your mother's hand tightened on yours when she passed a man on the street who looked like the man who assaulted her mother, whose hand tightened on hers 30 years before. It passes through the insistence your uncle had that addicts "lack moral fiber," and the way he gets aggressive when he drinks, just like your great-grandfather did, and how your cousin, his daughter, is a teetotaler for "unspecified reasons." There is even some research, although it is still in the very earliest stages and has some methodology flaws, that traumatic events can cause DNA changes that pass down through the generations.

And there are smaller traumas that we carry and pass on as well, particularly those of us who are or have fathers. Most of us have heard the term, "toxic masculinity," and for those who haven't, it's **defined** by adherence to traditional male gender roles that restrict the kinds of emotions allowable for boys and men to express, including social expectations that men seek to be dominant (the "alpha male") and limit their emotional range primarily to expressions of anger. Yeah, I see you guys in here who are nodding to that one. This is where the "get up,

you're okay, boys don't cry," trope comes in, and the "real men don't ask for directions/help/etc."

And yes, that's another thing we pass on, and I'd like to give you my favorite example of it: my son and a female friend we playing at daycare, and ran into one another. They both went sprawling. Both started to cry about it. I bet you can guess who got fussed over, and who got told that they were fine and to go back out and play. These kids were the same size, they hit in the same way, and they reacted with the same level of hurt and fear. The reactions of the caretakers, however, was completely different. This is toxic masculinity at work.

It's fathers who wait until mom is home to do the dishes, moms who are stricter about their daughters curfews than their sons', husbands who say that family therapy is out of the question, and brothers who snack on Goldfish crackers while their younger sisters chop vegetables alongside mom.

So, this has all been pretty bleak, right? Happy Father's Day! But here's the thing- I try really hard not to throw this much rain at you without some rainbows at the end.

Because here's the thing. All of this- our trauma reactions, toxic masculinity, the habit of yelling at your kids you get into when you're stressed because your mom did it to you... all of it is trained. And you know what that means? It can be retrained. That means you can learn to be better. Because you already have. I guarantee there's at least one thing you used to do that you didn't like, and you changed it. Maybe you've quit smoking. Or started walking in the mornings. Maybe you just lowered the amount of sugar you put in your coffee in the mornings. You retrained yourself once, and you can do it again.

My husband was raised in a house that would be considered violent by modern standards, and normal at the time. He and his brother both were smacked and spanked as a matter of course, almost casually, not to mention yelled at. But when our son's therapist made it clear that escalating his outbursts by raising our voices back or otherwise meeting his emotions with our own anger only made things worse, we both set out to retrain ourselves. I watch Max when he's dealing with Damian. I see when his very first instinct is to grab the infuriating little

butthead and shake him until his brains fall out. And I see when he forces himself to step back, to take a breath, and to ask him gently what's going on and how we can help. I see when he tells Damian that he, Max, wants Damian to be more comfortable with his emotions than he grew up being. I see when the man who always hated people touching him cringes but still smiles at Diana after she wipes a snot-spit-and-cookie-crumb-covered hand down his cheek.

And he isn't the only one. I polled some of my guy friends who I knew had a variety of childhood experiences, and asked them how they're healing from toxic masculinity. Jay told me that his father never made him feel as though he were important in his life, and especially not important enough to change some of his most damaging habits. Jay, on the other hand, has worked incredibly hard to ensure that his now-10-year old son *never* doubts how deeply his father loves him. They discuss it regularly, including the reasons why Jay and his wife divorced and Jay's role in it, and how Jay hopes that his son won't repeat his mistakes. Another friend, Christian, was raised by a father for whom not only was it "my way or the highway," but that way was enforced by his fists. Christian works incredibly hard to always hear his daughters out, to find out why they made the decisions they did and to discuss what might be better options in the future.

What has once been trained can eventually be retrained. Is it easy? Of course not. But everyone here has learned a skill before, be it tying your shoes or perfecting your golf swing, and we, too, can learn this one.