

“Climbing and Lifting,” June 21, 2009

Today is Father’s Day, and Bill Cosby once summarized the importance of this day by saying, “Fatherhood is pretending the present you love most is soap-on-a-rope.” As with all those days—Father’s Day, Mother’s Day, Grandparents’ Day—we all know that the physical presents that are given and received do not contain the real significance of the day. It’s about something much more than that—it’s about physical **presence**—being there and the influence one person can have on another, for the good.

Hopefully, that’s what Father’s Day is for all of us. However, like Mother’s Day, it can be difficult for some of us. Maybe our fathers are no longer alive, and that leaves a huge hole in our lives, or perhaps our fathers were non-existent, either by being totally absent from our childhood, or by being occupied with other responsibilities to the point that it seemed as though they were absent. I’m also aware that it’s easy to excuse ourselves from identifying with this day if we aren’t parents—regardless of whether that’s filled with regret and sadness, or intention and relief.

Wherever we are along this spectrum, the reality is that each of us has had someone in our lives who has affected us—either for good, or not-so-good, and we as adults have a role to play with those whose lives we intersect. Our best life is one in which we are a positive influence and good role model for others, but we don’t always know how to do that. That’s what I want us to explore today.

A good place to start is with the Bible passage we have for this morning. It’s the writer Paul to the people in Rome, and I believe, to each of us. Our version reads like this: **“Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, ‘How can I help?’”**

I believe what he was trying to help us understand is that, as we grow stronger, as we live closer to the way God would have us live, we are to “lend a hand” to others. He says pretty directly, **“Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, ‘How can I help?’”** It’s not just about us; it’s what we can do to help others live life more fully and positively. In a sense, that’s really climbing and lifting at the same time.

The inspiration for this message came from the season’s final episode of Extreme Makeover Home Edition—the one that took place here in Indianapolis. The recipient of a new home was a man by the name of Bernard McFarland, who lives on Oxford Street. Bernard has three sons, and they were living in some pretty rundown conditions—non-working plumbing, leaks

from one floor the one below, and more. That was the situation when they were chosen to receive a new home.

But there’s more to the story, and why Bernard McFarland’s family was chosen for the program. Even though he doesn’t earn a great deal of money, and has needs for his own family, Bernard has not limited his range of care and support to just his three sons. He has gathered around him a group of kids in his neighborhood, and using a rickety van, takes them to museums, libraries, and other places of interest to broaden their world and to help them aspire to a different life from the one they might otherwise have.

When the host of the show asked him about his actions and why he does what he does, he answered that he was trying to live his life motto: **“Lift as you climb.”** What did he mean by that? As I understand it, he simply meant that he has within him the desire to better his own life, wanting a life filled with love and care. However, that’s not just something he wants only for himself; he wants the same for others, especially the youth in his neighborhood. He hopes to help them move toward a better life at the same time that he is working toward the same thing for himself and his family. Bernard McFarland understand that this is not done in isolation from others. As we climb, as we make forward progress, it’s up to us to bring others along with us, and help them find and make a better life, and a better future.

As I thought about his motto, “Lift as you climb,” it occurred to me that that is really the kind of life every one of us can strive for. It’s not just about making things better for me and only me; it’s about making life better for all those we encounter. How can we do that? How can you and I lift as we climb?

One of the ways we are all doing that, whether we are aware of it or not, is by our very presence. Some, I suppose, might call that creating a circle of influence. Others might use the term, “mentoring.” Perhaps the concept of being a role model or mentor is one we can best identify with. YourDictionary.com defines a mentor as: “the loyal friend and advisor of Odysseus, and teacher of his son, Telemachus; **a wise, loyal advisor; a teacher or coach.**” A mentor is someone who is a trusted guide or counselor, and someone who is a source of strength, encouragement. Mentoring is about being an advocate for another person. It’s about giving help and support in a non-threatening way, allowing trust to grow, all the while empowering the one who’s being mentored to move forward with confidence.

Whether we’re talking about fathers, mothers, older siblings, teachers, coaches—no matter who we’re referring to as a mentor, there are some qualities that they seem to hold in common. One of the gifts they display is patience

Whenever we’re teaching or coaching others, directly or indirectly, it takes an incredible amount of patience. Arnold H. Glasow put it like this: **“The key to everything is patience. You get the chicken by hatching the egg, not by smashing it.”** We hear that “patience is a virtue,” but in our hurry-up world, it’s not one that we honor very much. We tell our kids to hurry so they won’t be late; we ask them to do something, but if they dawdle,

or become distracted and enthralled with something more interesting to them, we're apt to lose our patience with them.

Perhaps a better way would be for us to take a deep breath, slow down a step or two, and appreciate their ability to be fascinated with the little things around them. Patience is a key quality for mentors to possess, because the focus is on the student, the child, the one we're mentoring, and not on our own needs or time schedule.

A mentor is also one who is willing to try new ways of doing things, and fostering a sense of creativity in another. That means that we don't insist that there is only one way to do something, or that our way is the right way. That may take a more adventurous spirit than some of us might naturally possess, but as we talked a few weeks ago, being willing to color outside the lines can be encouraging to others, and can offer them the chance to be more innovative and enterprising.

A mentor is one who is able to focus on the other person, taking the time to learn his or her strengths and attributes. He or she has the ability to see the gifts that the child or co-worker or student possesses, and is willing to take the time to nurture those talents and abilities. That means in an encouraging and positive way, not criticizing and correcting, but allowing mistakes to happen, and then helping the child learn from them.

Even beyond seeing the gifts is the awareness that everyone of us has our own unique abilities, skills, interests and talents, and a true mentor is one who does not try to create a clone of him or herself, but instead, encourages the other to be true to who he or she is. In other words, just because Dad was athletic and loved to play all kinds of sports does not necessarily mean his child will want to do the same thing. We have to allow our kids to pursue their own interests, to follow their own path, and encourage them as they go.

Mentors, parents, teachers, coaches are those who try hard to have their priorities in the right place. Someone by the name of Harmon Killebrew talked about how his father used to play with him and his brother in the yard. His mother, he said, would often come out and say, "You're tearing up the grass." His Dad would reply, "We're not raising grass; we're raising boys."

That's someone who had his focus in the right direction. The grass in the yard will grow again, but children only have one childhood. These are human lives we're shaping and influencing by our words actions. They're learning about life's priorities by everything we do, even more than by what we say.

Bernard McFarland is the father to three sons, but he is a mentor, a guide, a counselor who is willing to share his life, remembering to "Lift as you climb." So my question is: How we are doing in that regard?

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we will seriously consider what it might be like if we adopted Bernard McFarland's life motto, "Lift as you climb," as our own. My hunch is that we would find

ourselves living out the words of our Bible passage that said: "Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, 'How can I help?'" If we did that, I can see a world much more loving, much more giving, much better than the one in which we currently live. So, how about it?

Have a Happy Father's Day, and go in peace.
Amen.