

CURRERE PRAYERS OF A NEW FATHER

By Kevin M. Talbert

The College of Idaho

PROLOGUE

Amos Talbert made ours a joyous family of three upon his birth on October 12, 2021.

I (PAST)

MY FATHER

You'll never meet my father, your grandfather, in person or get know him for yourself. He died four years before you were born. All you'll know of him will be photos, stories. Both are often neatly curated to portray their subject in the simplest and best possible light. Of course, memory is also imperfect, tinged with emotion that imbues the memory with a particular hue. Thus, my own memories of your grandfather are interwoven with many emotions that I have not yet fully accounted for yet shape the way I recount him to you. My relationship with my own father, such as it was, deeply impacts my image of what being a father means, the type of father I do and don't want to be.

I tell you all of this, son, to let you in on a little secret: there's a big part of me that is afraid to be your dad. You see, I am like my father in many ways. During a year of online pandemic teaching, I often saw him as I looked at myself on screen, his facial expressions reflected in mine, our countenances no doubt converging via DNA and disposition, perhaps more so especially as the road through middle-age accelerates. Beyond similar facial features, we shared a few interests that allowed safe ground for a détente that my father really never achieved with my older brother (your uncle): baseball; reading, especially historical non-fiction and biography; a love of music (his tastes nearly exclusively classical) and going to the theatre; working puzzles; being involved in church activities, to name a few. My father was often inflexible, his way or the highway, and he was a legendary curmudgeon—damning various aspects of modern culture or all of it, really, among his most revered past times. I, too, can be inflexible, craving and clinging to routine, expressing consternation at new or unfamiliar opportunities, experiences, people. My dad's curmedgeonliness made me miss out on opportunities as a kid, and my own sometimes still continues to rob me of the joy of new adventures. (I'm thankful that your mom graciously and gracefully navigates this aspect of my personality. She's a great encourager and has a gentle way of getting me to come around to new things so that I don't rob myself of joyous opportunities.)

On their own, maybe these shared personality traits are inconsequential, mere generational quirks. Unfortunately, though, despite some of our similarities, the defining traits of my relationship with my father were (my) fear (of him) and (his) anger. While I sometimes try to claim we had a poor relationship, I more often question whether we truly even had one. Ours was tremulous at best. Certainly, I felt little intimacy with my father despite our similarities. I don't remember my father ever saying, "I love you," neither to me nor my brothers nor to my mother. He was far more likely to use words that were hurtful, biting, especially toward mom. I do remember acts of commitment, acts of generosity and charity toward me/us that can easily be construed as loving, and I can take that as perhaps the best he could muster. As I understand it, he had a tense

relationship with his own father, so maybe he simply did not have a helpful model of a loving father from which to follow.

Consequently, son, my prayer as our relationship develops over the years is that I find a way to interrupt the poor father/son relational cycle that has characterized the previous three generations of my family. Ultimately, I am not the same person as my father, despite our similarities, and I am working to temper those parts of myself that are tempted by anger and bitterness. I want our relationship to be peaceful. I want you to always feel certain that I love you!

II (PRESENT)

THE WORLD AT THE TIME OF YOUR BIRTH

Amos, parents across generations express their desire for their child to inherit a better world than they were born into, and certainly, your mom and I pray the same for you. We are by no means the first parents to worry about the world into which they have brought their child. Still, we echo those generational laments for the cruel world we wish we could protect you from and hope to equip you for.

You are born into a fraught time in our country and our world. The pain and suffering of our present is nearly overwhelming. Over the past two years, nearly one million Americans (*New York Times*, 2020) and more than six million people worldwide (Wikimedia, 2021) have died from the COVID-19 virus. More than 140,000 children in the United States lost a caregiver to the disease (National Institutes of Health, 2021). Believe it or not, many people in the U.S., including in our own Idaho community, even protested the simplest measures to mitigate the virus's spread. Mass-casualty shootings are now so regular that they barely make news unless they include double-digit fatalities. There was even a shooting at the mall in nearby Boise when you were scarcely two weeks old that killed three people. Police officers and civilians in many cities continue to hunt Black Americans with little consequence. The U.S. military only recently disengaged after 20 years of perpetual war in Afghanistan. In the last several months, multiple natural disasters, from record heat waves to fires, hurricanes, and floods, have devastated communities. Christian nationalism and market fundamentalism buttress an insurgent fascism, of which the attempted coup of January 6, 2021, is a stark example. A vocal minority of people in the U.S. are outraged about schools teaching students that it's wrong to be racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.

Yet, despite all of this, the world is not all bad; love endures, and people resist hatred and evil-doing. One of my favorite educators, a gentle man and great educator named Mr. Rogers who lived and taught when I was growing up, once reminded people to "look for the helpers" when bad things happened (Rogers, 2004, p. 6). Even with all of the bad things happening in our world, there are many people who are doing their best to care for others and to make the world a better place for people to live. There are very real evils in the world, and denying that fact won't change it. But for every evil, there are also people working to resist that evil and to transform circumstances so they are more just, more loving, more equitable, more sustainable. And, because of this, you need to know a little about...

III (FUTURE)

YOUR NAME

I want to say a little about why your mom and I chose your name because our choice was, in part, a response to the world at the time you were born. Of course, we like

the sound of your name, and we like that it is a bit “old school.” We don’t expect you to meet many other Amoses, to always have another Amos in your class at school. Our hope was, in short, that it would be sort of uniquely timeless.

Most especially, though, we gave you your name because of its meaning and its historical connections. You share your name with a Hebrew prophet, one of the “minor prophets” of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible. A prophet’s job was to bear witness, to critique the society falling short of God’s purposes for his people, especially that His will be done among/through them. In his particular case, the prophet Amos decried the corruption of the religious authorities of his day, especially those who used their wealth to consolidate their power while those who were poor continued to suffer. Notably, his righteous fury was directed “within the body” of his own religion rather than at outsiders. His was not primarily a directive for those not “chosen by God” (i.e., Gentiles) to repent. Rather, it was a searing rebuke of those who claimed to be God’s chosen people yet who did not live according to his commands, especially his command to take care of the poor and needy, those who hold the least power in society. As Amos professed it, God desires to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001/2022, Amos 5:24).

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., used that same verse from the book of Amos many times during his own prophetic ministry to illustrate the call for racial and economic justice. During his ministry, Dr. King called the nation to account for the sins of racism, militarism, and economic exploitation that left so many White and Black Americans (and people around the world) alike suffering. Like the prophet Amos himself, many of Dr. King’s most pointed critiques were for members of his own faith tradition, i.e., Christians, and other religious leaders who continued to perpetuate racist structures, segregation chief among them, even in their own churches.

So, my child, I say all this in part to let you know that your mom and I both pray not just that you look for the helpers, but that you become one of the helpers. We don’t mean this to be a burden, and surely we do not mean for you to be an actual prophet! (On the contrary, the name Amos has been linked to the Hebrew word *amos*, which means “borne by God” or “carried by God.”) Rather, your name reflects your mom’s and my earnest prayers that you participate in the holy work of repairing our world. Even as I was unable to repair the breaks in my relationship with my father, I pray that you and I will always work to repair whatever fractures there might be in our relationship.

Amos, the future is not guaranteed, not automatic. It is something we must make—together—with other people. It will be tempting to look around at the world and think it has always been this way and couldn’t be any other way. Really, though, things are as people made them, and thus, if we want a different world, we have to struggle for it. Your mother and I want you to always look where there is suffering and join the work to alleviate it. You are very much our prayer for the future—your life is one way we project hope into the dark world!

I know it may seem unfair to ask you to carry this weight of the world with your simple name. We don’t expect you to carry it alone; it’s a burden that your mother and I share also (among countless other people in your life from your church, friends, etc.). We desire to model for you what it means to work for just and loving relationships, and however imperfectly we do so, we pray for grace as we do our best to raise you in this world. We love you. We are so glad you have come into our world and are overjoyed to meet you.

Amen.

REFERENCES

- English Standard Version Bible*. (2022). ESV.org. <https://www.esv.org/> (Original work published 2001)
- National Institutes of Health. (2021, October 7). *More than 140,000 U.S. children lost a primary or secondary caregiver due to the COVID-19 pandemic*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved January 7, 2022, from <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/more-140000-us-children-lost-primary-or-secondary-caregiver-due-covid-19-pandemic>
- New York Times*. (2020, March 3). *Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest map and case count*. Retrieved January 7, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html>
- Rogers, F. (2004). *Helping children deal with tragic events in the news: Timeless wisdom from Fred Rogers for parents, caregivers and teachers*. Family Communications. Retrieved April 19, 2022, from <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/documents/files/misterogersfinal/download>
- Wikimedia Foundation. (2021, November 5). *Template:COVID-19 pandemic data*. Wikipedia. Retrieved January 7, 2022, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:COVID-19_pandemic_data