Father's Day

As we celebrate Father's Day today, I would like to share with you the following story about the effect that one father had on his family.

This particular family had three small children who were determined to have their own little puppy dog. Mom protested because she knew that somehow or other, she would end up caring for the pup. The children solemnly promised that they would take care of it. Finally she relented and they brought their little puppy home. They named him Danny and cared for him diligently - at first. But, sure enough, as time passed, Mom found herself becoming more and more responsible for taking care of the dog. Finally, she decided that the children were not living up to their promise so she began to search for a new home for Danny. When she found one and broke the news to the children, she was quite surprised that they had almost no reaction at all. One of them even said rather matter-of-factly, "We'll miss him."

"I'm sure we will," Mom answered, "but he is too much work for one person and since I'm the one that has to do all the work, I say he goes."

"But," protested another child, "if he wouldn't eat so much and wouldn't be so messy, could we keep him?"

Mom held her ground, "It's time to take Danny to his new home."

Suddenly, with one voice and with tears in their eyes, the children exclaimed, "Danny? We thought you said Daddy!"

Well, today is Father's Day, and we usually spend it praising Dad. On your behalf, preachers like myself customarily extol him as well. The
message is usually from us to him. Today, if you will bear with me, I want to do something different, precisely the opposite. Much to Dad's chagrin, I want to deliver a message from him to us, a message he may find difficult to give himself. To make this easier on you and me and Dad, I want to deliver this message through the medium of a son's story, a true one. So just relax, and let this story from Ed Nickum, which is actually every dad's story, convey the message to you.

My father lived a hard-working, middle-class life. He had served his country during World War II and held tight to the moral values he gained through the struggles of that era. In all the years of my youth, I knew of only two days of work that Dad missed. His honorable work ethic and quiet, solid manner also gave rise to one of his flaws—my father's inability to express his feelings or to speak aloud about the love he felt for his family. Yet there was one exception to this rule that I will never forget.

One Sunday, my sister, one of my brothers, and my wife and I had gathered at my parents' house for dinner. During the normal chatter, I noticed that my father slurred his words now and then when he spoke. No one mentioned it during dinner, but I felt compelled to discuss it with my mother afterward, as we sipped coffee alone together in the kitchen.

"He says his dentures don't fit anymore," Mom explained. "I've been bugging him for weeks to make an appointment with the dentist, but he keeps putting it off."

"The problem isn't his teeth, Mom. I don't know what's wrong, but he needs to see his doctor, not his dentist. I know he hates to go to the doctor, and I'll help drag him if we have to. I'm really worried."

Drawing on the lessons learned from her many years of marriage to a stubborn man, my mother devised a plan to deliver him to the doctor's office without a struggle. She made an appointment with the dentist, and then
called the doctor to explain the situation. The doctor, well aware of the
difficulty in getting my father to keep an appointment, went along with the
plan. Waiving the normal rules for a specific appointment time, he agreed to
see my father immediately after his dental appointment. The dentist, also
clued in to the conspiracy, pretended to adjust my father's dentures and
then sent him on his way. Mom took the "scenic route" home, and before he
suspected a thing, Dad found himself in the parking lot of the medical
complex. After the standard protest, he quietly followed my mother into the
doctor's office. She phoned me two days later.

"I'd like you to come over this evening. We need to talk," she said. I
rushed over after work. My mother motioned me into the kitchen. She spoke
softly so my father could not hear. "They found a brain tumor," she said.
"It's too large at this point to operate. They're going to try to shrink it with
radiation and chemotherapy; maybe they can do something then." She
stopped to wipe tears from her eyes.

My father soon began to undergo a barrage of treatments. One of the
side effects was the loss of almost all of his thick black hair. One of the
lighter moments we experienced during this ordeal was when my wife
Michele gave birth to our first child, and we all laughed to discover what had
happened to Dad's hair: Chelsey arrived in the world wearing it.

My father's condition worsened, and the doctors finally informed us
that his condition was terminal. During one of his prolonged stays in the
hospital, we brought Chelsey with us when we visited him. By this time his
speech had deteriorated to the point where interpreting the words he tried
to form was virtually impossible. Lying in bed, my father's head propped up
on pillows, he tried to communicate with me through grunts and hand
gestures. I finally figured out that he wanted me to set Chelsey on his
stomach, so he could make faces at her. With my father's hands wrapped
around her tiny waist, Chelsey sat on her grandpa, and they jabbered non-
sense talk back and forth. Chelsey's vocabulary was restricted by her youth, my father's by the horrible disease that was stealing a larger part of his brain with each passing day.

Dad remained in control of his laughter, however, if not his speech. And how he laughed that day. He mumbled and cooed to Chelsey; she returned the volley with a stream of gurgles and slobbery consonants. Then they'd both erupt into deep belly laughs. The bond that grew between grandfather and granddaughter never required a formal language. Dad discovered an ally who fell in love with him completely and unconditionally. Chelsey possessed the child's knack of knowing a grandfather's loving touch when she felt it. After Dad escaped the hospital for the familiar and comfortable surroundings of his own home, the Grandpa/Chelsey comedy routine became a regular part of our visits. Both participants found it hilarious. They laughed every time they played the game, each trying to out-silly the other.

Finally, on a visit to my parents' home during what we all knew were my father's last days, my mother took Chelsey from my arms and announced, "Your father would like to see you alone for a minute." I entered the bedroom where my father lay on a rented hospital bed. He appeared even weaker than the day before. "How are you feeling, Dad?" I asked. "Mom said you wanted to see me. Can I do anything for you?" He tried to speak, but I couldn't make out a word. "I'm sorry, but I can't understand you," I said. "You want your pad and pen?"

Ignoring my suggestion for his pad and pen, he slowly and with great effort pulled himself higher in the bed. Moved by the intensity of his struggle as he again tried and failed to speak, I reached out to hold his hand.

Our eyes met and locked, both of us suddenly forced to face the painful reality that all the years we'd spent together, as I'd grown from a child to a man with a child of my own, had come down to this one last
father-and-son moment. Tears glistened in my father's eyes. He shook his head and smiled at me as if to say, "Ain't this just the damnedest thing?" Then Dad took a deep breath and won one final battle with the disease that would soon win the war.

He softly spoke three little words with crystal clarity: "I love you."

We don't learn courage from heroes on the evening news. We learn true courage from watching ordinary people rise above hopeless situations, overcoming obstacles they never knew they could. I saw the courage my mother possessed when she chose to fight the battle that would allow her husband to remain at home where he belonged. I gained courage from our friends, neighbors, and relatives as they drew closer, circling wagons of love around until the last days of my father's life. Most of all, I learned about courage from my father, who simply refused to leave this world until he overcame his greatest obstacle: sharing his heart with his son.

Dads don't always openly share their love. On Fathers' day I just wanted to remind you that it's there. Oh, yes, children, it is there.