

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
May 13, 2007

Sausage and Peppers!  
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Not being a mother or a father, for that matter, I've been trying to figure out how I could acknowledge and honor those who are parents, especially moms, while recognizing that not everyone's experiences with their parents would be the same.

Looking back over my own 55 years as a son, what I recall of those years, my relationship with my parents has changed dozens of times in hundreds of ways. At least that's the way it feels.

I was the oldest (still am!), born to Betty and Joe in their early twenties, who had been married about 10 months before. During the early years, Dad worked for Ward Electric, Singer Sewing Machine, and the Telephone Company. Mom was stay-at-home (I guess I was a handful!), living in a three-family home owned by my grandparents in the Northeast section of the Bronx. Aunts and their spouses were all around (my father had four sisters). I'm sure I got a lot of attention, and if subsequent years are any indication – at times, a lot more attention than I wanted.

About a year later Michael was born. He came into this world with an imperfection in one of the valves of his heart – and went through at least two major surgeries at St. Clare's hospital in NYC before he was five. I can only guess what that must have been like for Michael and for my parents. They were tough times with all kinds of pressure on the young couple. I can remember some of the arguments, understandably knotted in the fear of what might happen and wondering how they were ever going to get through whatever it was that was going to happen. Family was all around us.

Well, they (we) made it through and my parents are still with us, and I can tell you that the sacred work of being a minister to families as they sometimes say farewell to loved ones or other times of difficulty, often is followed a few hours later with an extra call home.

Two other children, Kathy – the only girl, and Joseph, the youngest and producer of Ella – a grandchild – finally! Completed the family. All except Michael survive today. He died in a car crash at 18.

As you might imagine, and maybe know yourself, such a tragedy impacts family and friends in ways beyond description. Only God's grace and time seem to heal the wounds that don't go away – but seem to settle into a peaceful place, still alive with emotion, but no longer hinged with that “kicked in the stomach feeling” I never thought would go away.

These are some of my divergent thoughts on parents days, mother's days, father's days, holidays – all of which have taken on different dimensions over the years. For several years, I think I wished we could just avoid all the holidays. It would have been easier.

But there is no avoiding life and there is no avoiding the fact that through it all – my parents were still my parents – and we got through: in our own ways and together, and over many, many years.

There were happy times, sad times, conflicts, separations, sometimes silence, oftentimes, especially now – laughter, camaraderie, an easiness, and a friendliness. It's taken a long time for things to mellow: and that's just the way it is.

We all have different experiences and have varying degrees of function and dysfunction in those relationships. Yet there is something unshakable, unmistakable, if hard to pin down – that always remains in the relationship between mothers, fathers, guardians, care-givers and children – no matter the configuration. Call it love or something even beyond love, whatever that might be – that regardless of how things may be at the moment, the tie is rarely, really – forever broken: in life or I think -- after-life. It may be, just maybe that that tie, for lack of a better word is what is passed on from generation to generation into something we call hope. And when, for whatever reasons we might not get this from our own parents or guardians, there are others around who got it from theirs – and so no one has to be left out. It passed on, one way or the other – to, through, and by all of us.

It is the sharing of the one Motherhood and Fatherhood – the God in each of us, the Spirit, the namasthe, whatever it is you find to be the force beyond the universe we understand and know.

In some ways, John of Patmos talks about that this morning. Revelations, as strange as it sometimes is, causing some to suggest that Patmos was more like Woodstock in 1969 – as strange as it is, you know I can see that vision of a New Jerusalem – a vision that I think is connected to the hope that courses through creation and into what we create.

For me, the writer of Patmos makes it clear: sometimes there is a break in the lineage, the tradition, from “how things always were” to “how it is things will become.” Sometimes the breaks are subtle and sometimes stark. His vision of a New Jerusalem where everything we could imagine is supplied by simply the presence of God – this vision drew a line between the emerging Christian Faith and the established Jewish faith with an historical tradition from its start that called for the temple to always be the center of life and worship. Here, now, comes John saying: nope, no longer need the temple. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God is all you need to get to the New Jerusalem.

Now, there is no right or wrong here, at least no for me. There is more about a need some had to move in a different direction, probably not understood at all by many, including loved ones who felt they had somehow done something wrong with those they nurtured and raised that they could go suddenly go off the deep end” in such a destructive, insane way!

Over time, I have come to understand how nurturing and loving were never intended to be linear methods for predictable outcomes. They are, in fact, unconditional gifts of the human spirit – and enough in and of themselves – for the givers and the receivers.

It may very well be that the nurturing and the loving gave those “going over the seeming deep-end” the courage to do so – regardless of the anticipated outcome at the time of nurturing. Does that make sense?

This morning, before I started to write, I scanned the online news for the headlines, as I often do. The article about Pope Benedict XVI visiting Brazil and his confrontation with liberation theologians caught my attention, for a couple of reasons. First, it highlighted the rift in the church between a Pope whose theology was influenced by the Nazi attempts to socialize religion, explaining something of his (and Pope John Paul II) reaction against liberation theologians: the popes believe these activist Roman Catholics are linking their work for the oppressed with religion and sociopolitical activism to the point that lines between religion and State are blurred too far.

And, the theologians who are in trouble with Rome are an emblazoned group in their field: Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Jon Sobrino. In this and many other Protestant churches, these men are considered examples of servant hood and champions for the poor and marginalized in their respective countries and around the world.

Mother Church just seems to have trouble with some of its unruly children, don't you think? One wonders where Gustavo, Leonardo, Jon, and others could have gotten such ideas! Friends, I'll bet! I can remember my parents wanting to pick my friends for me – that was one of the areas we frequently had arguments about.

Well, in the case of liberation theologians, they will tell you that their inspiration and leadership comes from the gospel and, oh yes, that mild-manner preacher for a great heavenly terminus - Jesus.

Sure, blame it on Jesus.

Just kidding, but not about the inspiration. I love this morning's passage that Cass read for us. It's sort of “all in a day's work...” Jesus is at the pool where folks gathered, often seeking healing. There was a superstition of the time that the disturbance in this particular pool was caused by the spirit that lived in the waters.

Actually, it is believed to have been an intermittent spring that had its own schedule for feeding and bubbling water. The belief was that immediately following the disturbance in the water – the healing powers were at their strongest and whoever got in first had the best chance of being healed. So people would hang around waiting for this to happen and have their chance.

Along comes Jesus and he approaches someone who had been seeking healing in this way for almost 4 decades. Jesus walks up to him and asks if he really wants to be healed. He says yes and Jesus heals him AND says get up and take your mat (the rolled up flexible, portable beds of the day, and be on your way. Sin no more.

What makes me chuckle is the last line or so that says it was on the Sabbath that he did this. In other words, he violated the Sabbath law, once again, and now encouraged another to do the same by picking up his mat, also considered to be work on the Sabbath.

Aquistador! Jesus just couldn't resist stirring things up! The argument of the leaders, can you hear it, "What is this? This one has been sick for 38 years and he had to heal him on a Sabbath? He couldn't wait another day?" Quick somebody find her, so she can straighten him out!

Jesus knew. He knew exactly what he was doing. He was following in the steps of the prophets Enoch and Ezekiel and what John of Patmos would later write about – he was inching together the New Jerusalem, one person at a time.

He was taking care of family.

This human/spiritual family of ours, our parents, forebears, progeny, guardians, neighbors and friends, whether together at the moment or estranged – has been trying to work out our relationships with one another, our purpose in the universe, and ultimately our God and God's meaning and drive in our lives – for ever!. It is not always clear how this all works: sometimes joy is the product of the surprises of this life and sometimes the outcome is much less than joy, but there is no elimination from the true and broad family of who we are. They will know we are Christians – and more – by our love, that is – by seeing all (even the most difficult among us) as family and worthy.

About the sausage and peppers, I knew you were wondering!

[Story]

It seems life is sort of like that. We're all eventually combined into some wonderful, if unexpected remedy for life, sometimes barely resembling what we started out to be, but inexorably becoming something new, reforming, now and then with a bit of struggle and doubt – but never without hope,

Hope: The gift of every mother, every parent, every care-giver – as much as the Spirit is a gift of God to us. And even in the midst of sausage and peppers, there is hope – as hard as it might be to believe – for a better recipe – of sorts!

Amen.