

May 8, 2011

OUT OF THE NEST

There's a story that is oft repeated in my family about a certain Mother's Day years and years ago when I was four years old. It was Sunday morning, Mother's Day, and my father and three brothers and I were at the breakfast table eating another wonderful breakfast my mother had prepared for us. But as we were eating we noticed that my mother was not in the best of moods. Cabinets were closing with a little more authority, pots and pans were banging upon each other with a sense of agitation. She didn't have much to say at the table. And then it dawned on my father that he and we had forgotten Mother's Day. By the time he realized this mother had gone upstairs to get ready for church. Father tore out of the house and somehow located a florist that was open and bought for mother a beautiful corsage for her to wear to church. He brought it home and he gave the corsage to me and told me – little four year old me – to take it upstairs and give to mother. So I walked up the stairs carrying the corsage and found her in the bedroom and handed it to her dutifully saying my line: "Happy Mother's Day, mom." She looked at the corsage and she looked at me ... and she said – "Too late, I don't want it!" So I turned around and carried it back down the stairs to my dad. "She doesn't want it," I said. To which my father replied, unfortunately in a voice that could be heard by my

mother who was standing at the top of the stairs, “Put it in the refrigerator, she’ll get over it.” Well, guess what, she didn’t get over it. My father left for church – he was the preacher. My mom got the rest of us ready and she brought us to church. Now in this church the pastor’s family had their own pew. It was our assigned seating. We sat there every Sunday. But this Sunday when mom brought us in (not wearing her corsage)... she said, “We’re going to the balcony boys.” So up to the back row of the balcony we went. Now when the pastor’s family does not sit in their assigned seats – the whole congregations knows there’s a problem. Something’s up. Everybody in church spent the next hour of worship trying to figure out what was wrong with the pastor’s family. My father spent the next hour ... knowing that he was so far in the dog house ... he might as well start barking.

Six weeks later what rolls around, of course, is Father’s Day. So we gathered at the breakfast table and my mother has bought and wrapped about a hundred gifts for my dad. She is killing him with kindness. He is buried in gifts and cards and hugs from his boys. It is a Father’s Day never to forget. Especially when he gets to the last gift ... which he opens and what should it be? The corsage ... the very dead corsage from Mother’s Day.

You would have liked my mother. My mother had chutzpah. I have a lot more of those kinds of stories to tell about her. She didn’t live long enough ... she died at 63. The reason I

am a pastor and a person of faith has a lot to do with my mother. My father too, of course. But if there was a primary Christian educator in my family ... it was my mother. She's the one who read me Bible stories at bed. She's the one who taught my Sunday School class. She's the one who attempted to answer most of my faith questions. On Sunday morning I heard about my father's faith, and on Monday through Saturday I heard about my mother's faith. And I realize that what I had as a child was an enormous gift. I had what many children didn't have and don't have. I had a family that planted within me the seeds of faith that with the Holy Spirit and a lot of love ... were allowed to grow to make me, better or for worse, what I am today.

So it is for me a rather jarring text to read what we read today that comes from the mouth and heart of Jesus: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple." What am I ... what are we ... to make of this? Is Jesus anti-family? Does Jesus not care about our relationships inside our households? How are we to make sense of this peculiar call of Jesus to "hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even life itself?"

Now the truth is Jesus is never afraid to use jarring language. And the reason he's not afraid of using jarring language ... is because he wants to jar us. He wants to get our attention. Not for the sake of just getting our attention ... but in order to make it clear what kind of life

he's calling us to. Jesus jars us ... because he doesn't want to make the mistake of something getting lost on us. Jesus jars us ... because he loves us. He wants to make sure that we know what the course of abundant life is. He wants us clearly to have a choice.

Jarring language is sometimes the most caring and loving language you can use.

I was in a burning building once. I was in a graduate seminar at Drew University one night and the corner of the building caught fire ... and a live cigarette butt ignited some dry leaves and a fire started. As we were making our way out of the building I remembered that there was another seminar going on at the other end of the hall. So I ran down the hall and put my head in the door and said, "There's a little fire that is starting down at the other end of the building so you might want to think about leaving the building." I started back down the hall. I kept looking back and nobody was coming out of the room. I kept looking and looking and nobody came out. I realized that they detected in me no urgency. So I went back to the classroom and this time said, "The building is engulfed in flames. Get out now!" That did the trick. Nobody was hurt. And only part of the building was destroyed.

Sometimes the most caring and loving language you can use – is jarring language.

Sometimes you have to jar people to life.

So Jesus jars us. And he jars us with the truth that the path to abundant life ... is singular obedience in following Jesus. That is his claim. It is his non-negotiable. It is an uncompromising position. Follow me. It's not, follow me when you have the time. It's not, follow me when you get your act together. It's not, follow me after you retire. It's follow me!! Make your walk with me ... no one's walk but your own. Don't follow your friend as your friend follows me. Don't follow your father as your father follows me. Don't follow your sister as your sister follows me. Follow me. Make the faith you have ... your own faith and nobody else's.

Today is Confirmation Sunday. Several young men and women have stood before us today and what they have done to varying degrees I'm sure ... is that they have taken a step to say I am turning from following my parents who are following Jesus ... to following Jesus. I am making the faith of my parents my own faith. And it will be a different faith. It will have its own passions and interpretations and questions and ministries – but I have turned from my family and I have claimed it for my own.

Now the truth is ... not every kid gets that chance. Not every kid gets a parent or a set of parents that makes it possible for her to even come to a confirmation class. A lot of kids don't have parents who believe. Or who go to a church. Many kids have parents who are at great odds with the Church or with faith itself. So when Jesus says Follow me ... it means for some kids ... and some adults that the choice to follow Jesus – is a choice to step away from the family.

I baptized a Muslim man once. We had read through the scriptures together and he came to a belief in Jesus Christ ... and decided to be baptized. And that decision resulted in a certain strain with his family as you can imagine. A breach with the people he loved. There are faith traditions today that consider a convert to Christianity for all intents and purposes dead.

You see when Jesus calls us to follow him ... he singles us out. He doesn't say ... join the church and let the church follow Jesus. He doesn't say ... stick close to your mom and dad and let them follow Jesus. Jesus says ... "YOU! Follow me!" And then what we see is that we are being pulled away from family, friends ... and asked on our own to follow the man who promises abundant life. The car commercial of a few years ago exclaimed, "This is not your father's Oldsmobile." Well when Jesus walk the trails of Palestine his message was, "This is

not your father's Judaism. This is a new way, a new truth, a new life. You have to leave the nest."

And that's not always easy to do.

I remember going away to college. And I had grown up in a certain political tradition within our family – I won't tell you what it was. And it wasn't long into college that I got introduced to other political traditions and it came time for the Presidential election that fall and I voted outside of our family political tradition. We loved talking politics in my family. So my father did his very best to convince me to keep my vote inside the family political tradition. I didn't. And when my candidate won – I called my father to get his take on the whole thing and he didn't want to talk about it. I'm not sure what disappointed him more – the fact that his candidate lost or that his son voted for the other guy. (Don't try to draw from this story what my political leanings are now – it will not be helpful.)

In like manner ... our faith, our spirituality, our life in Christ is to be our own. We are meant to pull away. This all crystallized for me when I was being confirmed 95 years ago. My father taught the confirmation class and when it came time to join we met with the Session and

we were publicly examined. We had been given the questions in advance to prepare for – so I came prepared. We had to know questions about the books of the Bible, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, elements of church life, etc. So I came prepared to nail all those questions. So when it came my turn my father stood me up and asked me, “Why do you want to join the church?” That question was not on the list. “Why do you want to join the church?” my father asked me. Now ... I had to give my own answer. Not his answer, not my mom’s answer – but my answer. I can’t remember what I said exactly. What I can remember is feeling at that moment that I was on my own.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*, a book that changed my life really, minces no words when he talks about Jesus’ call in our life. One of the many points he makes in the book ... something that jarred me .. is how Jesus isolates us when he calls us. Christ makes us individuals when he calls us. Every person is called separately and must follow on his or her own. “Neither father nor mother, neither wife nor child, neither nationality nor tradition, can protect a man at the moment of his call. It is Christ’s will that he should be thus isolated, and that he should fix his eyes solely upon him.”

So let me finish with a story -

When I was a little boy I cut the bottom of my foot on a piece of dirty glass. So my father told me I had to go to the doctor's office to get a shot ... a tetanus shot. Now I don't know about you but getting shots is not my most favorite thing in the world. I hate shots. I hate even the sight of a needle. But I was a brave little buckaroo; I didn't make much of a fuss. And so my dad took me down to the doctor's office and we took our seats there in the waiting room. I remember sitting there trying to look as brave as can be. And I had that look on my face that said, "No problem!" But when the nurse came out and called my name ---my father leaned over and asked, "Do you want me to go in with you?" And I said, "Well, if you want." So he did.

And so as we sat there in the examining room I began to smell pain. Little children when they go into doctor's offices ... they smell pain. So there I was smelling pain and just before the doctor came in to give me the shot --- my father said to me, "Now when the doctor comes in the first thing you're going to want to do is look at that needle in his hand. But I don't want you to look at that needle. I don't even want you looking at the doctor. I want you to look right at me." I nodded yes with a stiff upper lip.

Well, the doctor came in a second later and the first thing I looked at was that needle. And that needle was a least a foot and a half long. And then I looked at the doctor ... and not only did the doctor smell like pain ... he looked like pain. And then I remembered to look at

the other person in the room ... my father. And the smile on his face took the edge off my fear just enough to endure that shot. It still hurt --- but the needle didn't seem as big anymore.

Now here's the good news ... the jarring good news. That wonderful man who told me to focus on his smiling face ... was the same man who told me as I grew ... to turn my gaze away from him to someone else. To turn my eyes upon Jesus. That someday he wouldn't be here ... this wonderful man I knew as dad ... but there would be one who would be here. Who calls me to follow him. To obey him. To love him. To live for him. This is the abundant life you know. And it is one we get to choose.

Each of us.

All by ourselves.