

June 26, 2011

THE SONG YOU CAN'T GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD

Every preacher dates himself or herself when they refer back to a song or a movie or a TV show, so I know I date myself when I ask you to remember a song that Harry Chapin used to sing called *Cats in the Cradle*. It's a song written, actually, by Harry Chapin's wife. A song about a father and son. And the song starts this way:

My child arrived just the other day

He came to the world in the usual way

But there were planes to catch and bills to pay

He learned to walk while I was away

And he was talkin' 'fore I knew it, and as he grew

He'd say "I'm gonna be like you dad

You know I'm gonna be like you"

And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon

Little boy blue and the man on the moon

When you comin' home dad?

I don't know when, but we'll get together then son

You know we'll have a good time then

The song continues with this haunting reply of the boy in response to his father's departures and absences – "I'm gonna be like you, dad, you know I'm going to be like you." Until finally the boy is grown and married and out of the house and now doesn't have time for his father and the song concludes with the father's words:

I've long since retired, my son's moved away

I called him up just the other day

I said, "I'd like to see you if you don't mind"

He said, "I'd love to, Dad, if I can find the time

You see my new job's a hassle and kids have the flu

But it's sure nice talking to you, Dad

It's been sure nice talking to you"

And as I hung up the phone it occurred to me

He'd grown up just like me

My boy was just like me

Preachers like me yank the lyrics of that song out every once in a while because the truth is that it poetically and melodically speaks to a universal truth – something we all know deep down in our bones: that the apple doesn't often fall far from the tree. We grow up in many ways to be our parents. Daughters become their mothers. Sons become their fathers. Geneticists can show us this in the genetic code. Psychologists can show us this in their therapy sessions. We speak off the script of our parents. We follow the leader. We become chips off the old block.

Remember the haunting story of the farmer and his family who had taken in the farmer's father who had grown infirmed. And at first they were glad to have the old man live with them. But more and more he grew to be a burden. He was harder to take care of. And more and more the family complained of all his demands. Finally at dinner one night after another round of whispered complaints the farmer looked to his son and out of exhaustion and resignation said to the boy, "Take your grandfather out to the barn to live and find the best horse blanket and wrap him in it to keep him warm." So the son took his grandfather out to the barn and found the best horse blanket but before he wrapped his grandfather in it he tore it in two. He set one half aside and wrapped his grandfather with the other half. **Later when his father found out what the boy did, he went to the boy and scolded him.** "How could you do such a thing? What kind of boy would use only half a blanket to warm his grandfather?" "But father," the boy replied, "I'm saving the other half for you."

Whether we like it or not, whether parent or child, apples seldom fall far from the tree. Every child is trying to figure out what it means to be human and the teacher that is most before them is a mother or father or both. And the tapes that get made (or should I say the CD's that get burned) we have a hard time recording over.

Kind of like those songs that get stuck in your head.

Ever here a song sung or played on the radio and it gets into your brain and then it won't leave? You find yourself singing it, or humming it – almost without knowing that you're doing it ... and no matter how hard you try to forget it ... it keeps coming back? And it's never a really good song – it's usually something cheesy. *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head*, something like that. And my apologies in advance to those of you who will be singing and humming *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head* 9:00 this evening.

Truth is parents create songs ... tunes ... melodies ... lyrics ... patterns of life ... many of which never leave the minds and mouths of their children.

The Israelites had some songs to sing. The Psalmist in Psalm 137 talks about the people of exile – held captive in Babylon – taken from Jerusalem. There they are for 70 years in a foreign land. But they have these songs of Zion. Songs of home. Songs of their faith. Songs of their God. And their captors taunt them by challenging them to sing the songs of Zion. Mocking their longing for home. And yet the people of exile don't want to forget their home. They don't want to forget Jerusalem. "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy." In a foreign land with foreign gods with foreign ways with foreign values – the people of Israel don't want to forget that their true home is Jerusalem. Their true home is the temple. Their true home is the unadulterated worship of Yahweh.

So after 70 years of being far from home, Cyrus the King lets them free and tells them that they are free to go home. They can return to Jerusalem. They can rebuild the temple. They can worship the way they want to worship. Now they are not forced to go home. In fact, there are many who choose not to. There are many who say, "You know we've been in Babylon for 70 years. It's beginning to feel a bit like home now. We've gotten used to things here now. We've gotten used to the other gods. We've gotten used to the way of life. We've gotten used to the weather. So we're not sure it is as important to go back to Jerusalem. We don't think the temple matters as much as it used to. So in Ezra 2 the author makes a point to give us this long list of households who choose to go back home. Because not everybody does.

These are the people who made the choice. And each household is defined by a name. The family of Parosh. The family of Shephatiah. The family of Arah. The family of Pahath-moab. The family of Jeshua and Joab. The family of Elan. And on and on it goes. And for 60 verses – all of which I spared you – each of these families is named and numbered. About fifty families, not counting the families of servants. Now as I said each of these families is identified by a name. The name of the family leader. And it was that family leader ... the patriarch of the family – who made for his family a most amazing choice – the choice to go back home. In Chapter One it says – that these were those whose spirit God had stirred. Those whose spirit God had stirred were the ones who made the choice to determine that his family would be defined by the return to Jerusalem. The choice to make the song of Zion the song of the family. This would be the song that would never depart the minds and hearts of his children – the song of Zion.

But the truth was there were other families being taught other songs by family leaders who had decided not to go home. Theirs were the songs of Babylon. And for generations these families would be defined by the choice to stay. To remain in a land far from their spiritual home. **Seventy years of children that knew nothing except Babylon.** And so all of this is to point out something that is both obvious, but also profoundly important – and that is that spiritual song of your life – whether it is the song of Zion ... or the song of Babylon ... or the song of something else – is a song that has been largely shaped by your forbearers. For better

or for worse – the spiritual song that is playing in your head ... is a song you learned as a child. And the spiritual song your child is learning is the one they're learning from you. "I'm going to be like you, dad. You know I'm going to be like you." Now maybe that was a good song – maybe it was a bad song. Parents aren't perfect. But a lot of times people don't think about the song that got stuck in their head from a long time ago.

It helps me then to make sense of what Jesus says when he tells us that if we aren't willing to leave behind father, mother, brother, sister then we are not fit for the kingdom of heaven – that he is paying special attention to these songs that are playing in our heads. And he is asking the question – are you singing your song – or someone else's song? Is the spirit inside of you ... being stirred up by God? As much as you are your father or mother's daughter or son ... as much as a song has likely been implanted in your brain – as much as you might find yourself singing the song of Zion or the song of Babylon or a song somewhere in between – the question is ... what song is God stirring in you today? A song that is your own!

The psalmist in another psalm says, "I will sing to the Lord a new song." And maybe he's trying to sing a new song in Babylon. Maybe he's trying to sing a new song on the way to Jerusalem. Maybe he's trying to sing a new song now that he is in Jerusalem. But God longs for the day when the songs of the past ... when the songs of our mothers and fathers ... are

altered and shaped and edited and made to become the songs of the present ... and the songs of the children.

Many of you have heard me tell the story of when I was 10 and sitting in the Christmas Eve service and watching with faint attention my father and grandfather lead the Christmas Eve service. Both were pastors. And how my distraction was broken for a moment by the sound of my grandfather's voice leading the congregation in prayer. This ancient man who I did not know well was praying for the people on Christmas Eve. And I heard in his voice the passion of an old man for God. I felt as if he was talking to a real person. And I felt like he was talking to a real person who was in the room. And I felt like this person in the room to whom he was talking was his best friend. This was the song he was singing. And it's a song that never left me. It's one I've never managed to get out of my head. Thank God for that. But God wants me to do something with that song. The spirit stirs to make me make that song my own. To change some of the words. Adjust the melody. Change the register. So that it becomes not just an old song, but a new song.

How about you ... what is the spiritual song you got taught? We all got taught one – some about Jerusalem ... and some far from Jerusalem. We all got taught one. It's important to

pay attention to the tune in your head. But what is the song for today? What is the song you want your children, your grandchildren to hear?

You may remember the story of Martin Rinkart. Martin Rinkart was the pastor of the little church in Eilenburg – in Saxony, Germany. Seventeenth century. Bad time and place to be a pastor. It was the throws of the Thirty Years war. And during the war – refugees flocked into the walled city of Eilenburg to escape the killing. They brought with them the plague. People in the little town died at the rate **sometimes as high as** fifty a day – and it was the job of the local pastor, Pastor Rinkart to bury them. Eight thousand died in that town and among them was Rinkart's own wife. Burying 50 people a day and watching your wife die a miserable death ... might make in you a song that nobody would want to hear. Lament. Bitterness. Despair. But by the stirring of God's spirit what took shape in Pastor Rinkart was a new song. A new melody. A new lyric. Maybe it came to him from his parents. Maybe it didn't. But wherever it came from ... he made it his own. And the words of the first verse go this way:

“Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices. Who wondrous things hath done, in whom his world rejoices. Who from our mother's arms hath blessed us on our way. With countless gifts of love and still is ours today.”

He still is ours today. In Babylon. In Jerusalem. Wherever our mothers or our fathers have taken us. Wherever we have taken ourselves. Whatever it is that may have befallen us. He still is ours today. And is stirring within us, always stirring within us ... a new song.