

These are great truths about family life:

--Raising teenagers is like nailing Jell-O to a tree.

--There's always a lot to be thankful for if you take time to look for it.

--For example, how nice it is that wrinkles don't hurt.

--The best way to keep kids at home is to make the home a pleasant atmosphere....and let the air out of their tires.

--Families are like fudge – mostly sweet with a few nuts.

--Today's mighty oak is just yesterday's nut that held its ground.

--Laughing helps. It's like jogging on the inside.

--Middle age is when you choose your cereal for the fiber, not the toy.

--If you remain calm, you just don't have all the facts.

Here is a piece from Brian Doyle reflecting on being a father: "I think about power all the time as a dad. In the old days, when my children were tiny and squirming and wetting the floor like puppies, I was king, I made the rules, I fed and wiped and bathed, I thundered, I was the last word. (Well, the second-to-last word; as my daughter noted wryly when quite small, "Mom is the boss and you are the second boss.") But now that hormone hurricanes have swept through the house and my kids are suddenly supercilious teenagers, I have only the power to persuade, to suggest, to remonstrate, to hint, to remind, to confound, to complicate their brilliant and confused hearts. It took me a while to shift gears from boss to bemused, but I might suggest that we are all in the same boat, and whenever you think you are powerful you are pretty much not; or, in other words, what makes you powerful – money or position or brains – is only useful if you use it to elevate other people. Power is a cool tool, but tools at rest are only sculptures, lovely and useless." (GRACE NOTES, p. 136)

So today we celebrate the feast of the Holy Family, and reflect on our own families. And interestingly, Luke's gospel gives us two elderly folks as our focus, along with the child Jesus in the temple. First, Simeon, whose prophecy says the same thing about God that Mary's MAGNIFICAT had said to her cousin Elizabeth – that God lays low the proud and raises up the humble and the fallen; that God turns us upside down and reorders our lives. Simeon says that this child is destined for the rise and fall of many, and that He will be "a sign that will be contradicted," hated and feared as well as loved. Then there's Anna – whose name means 'grace' – a figure of hope. Despite the hardship of her own life as a widow – probably for over 60 years! – she's able to see the goodness of God around her and finds purpose in being a woman of 'grace' to everyone she meets in the temple. Like Simeon, Anna realizes who this Child is and what His life will mean to the poor and lost and marginalized, and she doesn't hesitate to tell others that, in this infant, the Kingdom of God has come.

So what do we do with all of this – elderly carriers of the faith, a family astounded at what was being said about their child, and where we fit in this story.

Kathleen Norris, commenting on her own faith-journey, makes an interesting comment regarding the ambivalent way in which faith and church come down to us. Her words: "As its Latin root, the word 'religion'

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is linked to the words ligature and ligament, words having both negative and positive connotations, offering both bondage and freedom of movement. For me, religion is the ligament that connects me to my grandmothers, who, representing so clearly the negative and positive aspects of the Christian tradition, made it impossible for me to either reject or accept their religion wholesale. They made it unlikely that I would settle for either the easy answers of fundamentalism or the over-intellectualized banalities of a conventional liberal faith. Instead, the more deeply I've re-claimed what was good in their faith, the more they set me free to find my own way." (Norris, DAKOTA: A SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY, 1993, p. 133)

That's an excellent insight, given the struggle many have today in regard to their own religious background, which largely came from our families. More and more, we see people who are bitter about how they were raised religiously and see the tradition that was handed to them as warped, unhealthy, and positively harmful in terms of how they feel about God and themselves. Yet, curiously, those same people generally find themselves incapable of simply shedding that tradition and walking away. What happened to them in terms of religion and church has a positive grip on them, even as they deeply resent a lot of it.

This isn't, of course, everybody's experience. Some of us have less to resent. For myself, religiously I drew a luckier straw. Religion and church were mediated to me with less shadow. I had good parents, a good parish, a good Catholic school, good nuns who taught me, and good priests who ministered the sacraments to me. In my crucial years, growing up, I was never once betrayed by a significant other in terms of the faith. My parents, my teachers, and the priests and sisters who ministered in our parish had their faults, but at the end of the day they essentially lived out what they professed. Consequently, the faith they handed me was credible, real, free of undue legalism and guilt, and very importantly, a faith that has the capacity to see real fault and sin within the community and yet know that the grace of the community far overrides that.

Not everyone has been so lucky. More than a few of my friends, as well as many others that I have encountered in my ministry, have had a very different experience. They were handed the same faith that I was, but often with as much shadow as light. Sometimes what was handed them was warped by harshness, guilt, authoritarianism, or an unhealthy patriarchy. They were given some truth, but not with any balance or nuance or fullness. Worse still, sometimes they were horribly betrayed by those who were supposed to embody trust and were left with the message: "Do as I say but not as I do!" They were being handed the truth and were being simultaneously betrayed. In the end this has left them with a painful ambivalence, sometimes even bitterness. The truth has a grip on them, even as the trauma of being betrayed or the pathology of trying to live out a warped truth can make that grip seem like something sick.

Hence the dilemma of many often bitter Christians today: "I've been given faith and church so strongly that it's in my DNA. I can never leave the church, yet I can't simply accept wholesale the tradition that's been handed me either. I can't buy the whole package, no matter how I try. So I am left in this painful ambivalence – I can't take the full plunge and I can't walk away either!"

That's not a bad place to be. If we feel like that then our elders have done their job, however imperfectly. They've given us the faith and left us free at the same time, though that might not feel like freedom. Tradition is meant to do exactly this – hook us enough so that we can't just walk away from conscience and truth -- and yet leave us free enough to have some critical distance. God and truth, faith and church, never overpower nor underpower. Classical theologians and spiritual writers have always assured us of this.

Thus religion is indeed a ligament, offering bondage and freedom, both at the same time. Many of us have been given the Christian tradition – faith and church – in such a way that, as Norris so aptly puts it, we

now find ourselves unable either to simply reject it wholesale or to buy unqualifiedly the flawed version of it that was handed on to us. Where does that leave us? Where any free, adult church or family member should want to be, stamped indelibly with the DNA of the family, yet free enough to offer criticism in the face of the family's faults and history.

The path of maturity in religion requires honest questioning, deep wrestling with hard truths, healthy integration, and surrender to something – someone larger than ourselves. Which allows all families, including our own flawed families, to eventually become something that might even approach a HOLY family. Amen. (most of this adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, "Receiving our Faith Tradition," posting of August 26, 2001)

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