

Now and Then

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, May 9, 2010, Deuteronomy 26:1-11

There was a time when Kathy and I thought we would never get to it, and then several times when we wondered if we would ever get through it, but this Friday (when Emily turns 20), Kathy and I will have officially survived all our children's teen years with our sanity reasonably intact. I can still remember when we were just starting out as parents how people would say that the years go by so quickly. It turns out they were right, though I must admit I was skeptical when it seemed like we were going through the terrible two's for six years in a row.

Of course, it is Mothers Day that has me thinking about these things. You can't fully appreciate everything mothers do and go through until you witness it up close as an adult, especially as a Dad. One trusted source on what mothers face is author Judith Viorst, who has written for both children and adults. She incorporated her own experiences as a mother into the book, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. And she shared in a 1991 magazine article her interviews with children about what makes a good mother. She wrote: "None of the children expected a mother never to get angry. She has to, said Ted, or she'll faint from holding it in. But it's best to remember, said Randy, that when your mother starts to act real weird, you have to look scared and serious. Don't giggle. When mommies are mad, they get madder if you giggle."

"My mommy got so mad, said Megan, that she yanked the plate off the table and all the mashed potatoes flew into the air. And why, I asked, pretending I'd never heard of such shocking behavior, why would a mother do a thing like that? Well, said Megan, she told my older brother, Mike - he's 11 years old - to eat the potatoes on his plate and he said 'Later.' And then she told him again to eat the potatoes and Mike said 'Soon.' And then she told him he had better eat those potatoes right now and he said, 'In a minute.' And then she stood up and Mike finally took a bite and told her, 'How can I eat them? They're cold!'"

In a more scientific approach, anthropologist Margaret Mead, who studied the interaction between children and their mothers in a number of cultures all around the world, came up with 5 qualities that make a woman a good mother. A good mother, according to Mead, treats each child as an individual, helps the child find his or her own path, listens a lot, doesn't hesitate to show disapproval when necessary, and stands up for her own beliefs in order to retain her children's respect.

It is a good list, but we could all probably think of a few things to add. One thing I would add is that good mothers know how to give you confidence and keep you humble at the same time. Kids need encouragement and someone to celebrate their achievements, but a mother who lets a child get an over-inflated ego does that child no favors. Fortunately for most of us, our mothers have known just how to keep us down-to-earth. One of my favorite stories in this regard comes from Parker Palmer, an educator, author and activist with seven books and a host of awards to his credit. Palmer, now a consultant, tells about trying to explain to his elderly mother what he does for a living. He writes, "She asked, 'Tell me again what you do?' I explain that I visits churches and universities and corporations and conducts workshops.

'I see,' she said finally, 'you talk to them and they pay you for it?'

'That's right, Mother,' I said.

‘Well,’ she replied, ‘son, I like it when you talk to me, but I certainly wouldn't pay you to do it.’”

Good mothers know how to keep us humble. And the reason they can keep us humble is that, no matter how much we've accomplished or how famous we become, our mothers have seen us as bumbling beginners and as awkward adolescents. They remember – and help us remember – that we weren't always so great. There were plenty of times we failed and lots of times when we needed help and support.

In the scripture we read today from the book of Deuteronomy, we see that God instituted a practice for the people of Israel for a similar purpose. The people are soon to enter the Promised Land, where they will become an independent, populous, prosperous and at times powerful nation. But this is what God asks them to do:

“When you have come into the land . . . you shall take some of the first of all the fruit (each year) . . .(and) go to the priest When the priest takes the basket and sets it before the altar, you shall make this response: ‘My father was a wandering Aramean’”

It is pretty clear from what follows that the purpose of this annual ritual is to remind the people of Israel of the time before they were a great nation, a time when they were abused slaves whom God rescued, and that the land they came to possess was not something they earned, but something that was given to them as a gift. In short, the purpose was to keep them humble.

Humility is a major theme in scripture, though you seldom hear much about it in popular culture or even in the church these days. Somewhere along the line, especially in the late 20th century, people decided that a lack of humility was no longer a major concern. Ironically, what took its place was a concern about low self-esteem. Tremendous energy was poured into helping children feel special by telling them how wonderful they were, and praising them for even the feeblest efforts.

Some kids fell for this, and became insufferable adults who were sure they were superior to others in multiple ways. But most kids were too smart. They knew phony affirmation when they heard it. Instead of boosting their confidence, praise for poor performance sent the message that perhaps that was all they were capable of. Thus, in attempting to boost self-esteem, parents actually lowered it!

Self-esteem is important, but not something we can manipulate directly. We can't give someone else self-esteem. But if we love our kids, and are honest and fair with them, their self-esteem will take care of itself.

Humility, on the other hand, requires more attention. Pride is a perennial problem. My grandmother used to call it “getting the big head,” or “getting too big for your britches.” But it goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden, where the original temptation was all about pride. The serpent told Eve that if she and Adam ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, they would become like gods. Of course, if they were like gods – equal to the creator – they wouldn't need God anymore. They wouldn't have to depend on God for anything. They could do as they please. They could be in charge of their own lives and not have to answer to anyone. They could rule the world!

That sounded pretty good to them. But it was a lie. The sin of pride always is. Healthy pride is feeling good about who you are. The sin of pride is about believing you are something or someone you're not. We see the sin of pride at work when the successful person creates a mythical account of his or her life in which his or her success is solely the result of superior

intelligence, working harder than everybody else, and personal charm. It is the story of the self-made man or woman, in which they make the case that they deserve everything they have acquired and conveniently forget all the contributions of others to their success, and all the undeserved good fortune (or dumb luck) that helped them get where they are.

The people of Israel were particularly prone to pride, perhaps, because after all they were the “chosen people.” But they weren’t chosen because they were better than every other group of people. They were chosen to become better than they were, as examples of what God could do for all people. And to become better, they would need a lot of help from God – rescue from Egypt, manna in the wilderness, the Commandments. They didn’t do or create any of these themselves. It was all a gift from God. And though they would become successful and prosperous, they would never stop needing God or God’s blessings and guidance. So God gave them the annual ritual described in our text to keep reminding them, year after year, to be humble and to remember that they owed a lot to others for all the good things they enjoyed.

Today is a good day to remember what we owe to others – to our mothers and fathers, friends, fellow Christians, teachers, mentors and above all, to God. And it is a good day to stop and realize that if we in this country are blessed (and we are), it isn’t because we work harder, or are more righteous, or deserve it more than everyone else. It is because we are blessed by God, who calls us to be humble and to be generous, and to be a blessing.

Amen.