

Family Squabbles

May 20, 2012

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Greeting, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here,
on this perfect spring morning,
to worship, to leave the surface of life
and dive for deeper things;
to reverence the power of wisdom and love,
even as we face the reality of brokenness.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Singing #1000

Ingathering: *Story- When Mommy Was Mad*

Announcements. Conversations from the Heart

JAM offering

Sequence for the Day:

It's May. The cottonwood trees are snowing early this year, releasing their seeds in feathery wisps that tickle my cheeks when they whisk past.

It's May. The irises are blooming, releasing their relentless purples into the bright pastel air, soothing my weary soul with their outbursts.

It's May. The people who gather here are looking forward to conversations later during coffee hour. Or a walk with friends in the evening through German Village streets. Or maybe a few are feeling a bit of stage fright developing before their concert this afternoon; and some, the presence of grief that seems to dog their tracks no matter where they are. Or maybe a couple of folks are grateful that they are here, finally recovering from a stubborn winter illness. A few may be worried the sermon may bring up something they would rather forget; and one or two are thinking about things at work trying not to, but unable to get the nagging frustrations out of their head yet. Heads and hearts in this room are in many places right now, but, at this moment, everyone is entering the brief, but certain, togetherness of the coming silence.

silence

It's May, and our lives are full. School endings, vacation planning for some. Weddings are coming up, graduations, and coming of age. And through it all, our love for our family and friends, our struggles, our losses, reliable as sunrise and moonset. The names and faces we associate with our present lives we go to now, remembering them in this quiet embrace.

naming

It's May, and music sings to us of what it almost always sings to us about...Love, and growing deeper in soul...

First Reading *These tough words are found in a novel Tomorrow Will Be Better by Betty Smith written in 1948, the year before I was born. Her most famous novel is A Tree Grows In Brooklyn.*

Bad quarrels come when two people are wrong. *Worse* quarrels come when two people are right.

Second Reading: *This is an abbreviated scene from the play Luther, written by John Osborne in 1961. It's set in the kitchen of the Augustinian monastery where Martin Luther has just botched up while saying his first Mass, out of sheer nervousness. His father Hans had come to witness this event, even though he never really liked the idea of his son going into the priesthood. In this scene, he is now drinking wine with his son. Both men, it must be said, despite their very real differences, had a fondness for the bottle.*

Martin: **Father, why do you hate me being here?** *(Hans is outraged at a direct question.)*

Hans: *Huh? What do you mean? I don't hate you being here.*

Martin: **Try to give me a straight answer if you can, father. I should like you to tell me.**

Hans: *What are you talking about, Brother Martin? You know what? You don't know what you're talking about, because you've not had enough wine... that's your trouble.*

Martin: **That's not an answer to my question. And don't go saying I could have been a lawyer.**

Hans: *Well, so you could have been. You could have been better than that. You could have been a burgomaster, you could have been a magistrate, you could have been a chancellor, you could have been anything! So what!? Look, I don't want to talk about it. What's the matter with you!*

Martin: *(angry)* **You make me sick.**

Hans: *Oh, do I? Well, thanks for that, Martin! Thank you for the truth, anyway.*

Martin: **No, it isn't the truth. It isn't the truth at all. You're drinking too much wine – and I'm...**

Hans: *Drinking too much wine! I could drink from here till Gabriel sounds his horn – (and from*

all accounts, that'll blow about next Thursday –) so what's the difference?

Martin: Look, I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. It was just a shock to see you suddenly, after such a long time. I'd almost forgotten what your voice sounded like.

Hans: Tell me son – what made you get all snarled up like that when you were saying Mass earlier?

Martin: You're disappointed, aren't you?

Hans: I just want to know, that's all. Look, I'm a simple man, Martin, I'm no scholar, but I can understand all right. But you're a learned man; you speak Latin and Greek and Hebrew. You've been trained to remember things ever since you were a tiny boy.

Martin: I don't understand what happened.

Hans: I don't know, I really don't. You know, perhaps your father and mother are wrong about you, and God's right, after all. Perhaps. Whatever it is you've got to find, you could only find out by becoming a monk; maybe that's the answer.

Martin: But you don't believe that. Do you?

Hans: No; no I don't.

Martin: Then say what you mean.

Hans: All right, if that's what you want, I'll say just what I mean. I think... I think a man murders himself in these places.

Martin (retreating at once): If so, I am killing no one but myself.

Hans: I don't care. I tell you this place gives me the creeps. And that's why I couldn't bring your mother, if you want to know.

Martin: You know what? You never understand me, because you don't want to understand me.

Hans: Oh, that's fine talk, oh yes, fine, holy talk, but it won't wash, Martin. It won't wash because you can't ever, however you try, you can't ever get away from your body.... because that's what you live in, and it's all you've got to die in, and you can't get away from the body of your father and your mother! We're bodies, Martin, and so are you, and we're bound together for always. But you're like every man who was ever born into this world, Martin. You'd like to pretend that you made yourself, that it was you who made you – and not the body of a woman and another man.

Martin: *(rolling eyes)* **O My God! Churches, kings, and now, fathers – why do they ask so much, and why do they all get so much more than they deserve?**

Hans: *Is that what you think? Huh? Well I think I deserve a little more than you've given me ----*

Martin: **I've given you! I don't have to give you anything! I am – I exist! That's all I need to give to you. That's your big reward, and that's all you're ever going to get, and it's more than any father's got a right to. You wanted me to learn Latin, to be a Master of Arts, be a lawyer. All you really wanted was for me to justify you! Well, I can't, and, what's more, I won't. I can't even justify myself. So just stop asking me what have I accomplished, and what have I done for you. I've done all for you I'll ever do...and that's live, and wait to die.**

Hans: *(pause)* *Why do you always blame me for everything?*

Martin: **I don't blame you. I'm just not grateful, that's all.**

Hans: *Why? I see a young man, learned and full of life, my own son, abusing his youth with fear and humiliation in this monastery. You think you're facing up to it in here, but you're not; you're running away, you're running away and you can't help it.*

Martin: **Well if it's so easy in here, why do you think the rest of the world isn't knocking the gates down to get in?**

Hans: *Because they haven't given up, that's why.*

Martin: **Well, there it is; the truth at last. You think I've given up.**

Hans: *Yes, there it is. That's what I think.*

Martin: **I'm sorry.**

Hans: *Yes, we're all sorry. And a lot of good it does any of us.*

Martin: **I suppose fathers and sons always disappoint each other.**

Hans: *I worked for you, Martin, I went without things for you.*

Martin: **Well?**

Hans: *Well! (Almost anxiously) Look, I know I beat you fairly often, and pretty hard sometimes I suppose, but it wasn't any more than any other boy, was it?*

Martin: **No.**

Hans: *Then what makes you so different? Other men are all right, aren't they? You were stubborn, you were always stubborn, you've always had to resist, didn't you?*

Martin: **You disappointed me too, and not just a few times.**

Hans: *I don't know what any of that means; I really don't. Look, I'd better be going, Martin. I think it's best; and I dare say you've got your various duties to perform. Good-bye, son. I'm sorry we had to quarrel. It shouldn't have turned out like this at all today.*

Sermon

In 1977, I spent six months in Rockford, Illinois, interning at the church there. They planned for my time with them very well. A member of the congregation provided an old car for me to use. The minister gave me a corner in the children's chapel for an office. And, of course, church members gave me a place to stay while I was there. But, it was a *different* place each and every month. Places with families who graciously made room for me, their young church intern. Families that, naturally, were very different from each other.

In hindsight, it was an unexpectedly rich course in family dynamics. You see, while I was living with them, every family tried, bravely, to be *the perfect* family, an inspirational family... at least for the first two weeks. Everyone got along, beds were made, everyone behaved at the dinner table. But I probably don't have to tell you that few families can maintain such perfection any longer than two weeks. And I was in each house *for four weeks*. So, although that was not the point of this arrangement, I did learn firsthand a great deal about how families REALLY are. Not always shiny and bright. Not always charming and neat. Not always like the famous television shows of my youth, still in endless re-runs; shows depicting mother June Cleaver cooking in her kitchen with a string of pearls around her neck. Or Jim Anderson the gentle father who "always knew best" and could solve every problem.

After two weeks with each family, June Cleaver and Father Knows Best disappeared. Mind you, I didn't see horrible families. I just saw reality. I watched a divorce happen in slow motion right before my eyes; I watched a couple with adopted kids from many nations threading through the multi-cultural maze; and I watched how a variety of parents reacted to kids going through puberty. A widowed woman living by herself was also a family, a family of memory, made real before my eyes with tender stories she told me daily, to my delight. Mostly, the squabbles I witnessed were small...even the divorce was handled very rationally.

The family squabbles I witnessed...even in the family going through a divorce...were different from the painful squabble between Martin Luther and his father Hans you heard Eric and me read this morning.

Now, the scene you heard is a pretty accurate sketch of the squabble that existed between my father and me for most of our lives. Now, let me be clear...I am talking about this tender subject of family squabbles using my own family, since I don't want anyone to imagine I am speaking about family squabbles from the vantage of office conversations with me. It's the only ethical choice I have this morning, as I see it.

Mind you, my father was an extraordinary man in so many ways. Respected by his peers, bosses

and employees at work, regarded as fair and just and even generous by them...that's no small thing. He was skilled in auto mechanics and carpentry, and could add rooms in a house with precision. When my mother went back to office-work once I had entered high school, my father, unlike many men of his generation, helped my mother with the house work fifty-fifty. He vacuumed, he washed dishes, he dusted. Again, no small accomplishment. He provided for us all, only hit me once that I remember, and he did not drink himself into a stupor, or stay out late.

But this is the same father whom neither my sister, or brother or myself could ever please, no matter what we did...and the same father who said to me at the dining table one day in front of everyone: "I just wish you were not who you are, what you are, and the way you are; I wish you were someone else."

I remember it was a Sunday afternoon when he said that to end-- to shut down-- a typical squabble between us. I remember each word like a blow, although I am sure he never remembered saying that later. His anger-self was completely unlike his work-self, or his tell-a-funny-story-about-army-days-at-the-supper-table self. These "selves" never seemed to overlap much.

The first time I watched a film-version of that intense scene from Osborne's play *Luther*, you will not be surprised, I have to imagine, by how it affected me. I felt as if the play-write had eavesdropped on my own family suppers, took notes, and then ascribed it all to Luther and his father. Because of that, when I got to seminary, I made time to study Luther; up, down and sideways. But studying Luther didn't improve my theology...instead, reading about his life made me feel less alone. Yes, alone. For the first thing I want to note about family squabbles this morning is that they can make you feel lonely. "No other family is like mine. No one else gets treated like me. No one else has to hide under a bed."

But I know now that other families ARE like mine. I know now I am not alone in having lived with the experience of a life-long squabble with my father. Marge Piercy says pretty much the same thing about her mother and herself in that quote on top of your orders of celebration. And even famous people, who are worshipped and put on pedestals by many...I am thinking of Jesus of Galilee right now...seem to have experienced family squabbles, just as much as I have. The Gospel of Mark does nothing to hide such things, reporting not one, but two embarrassing incidents. And of course, the list goes on...Mozart's father Leopold didn't get along with Wolfgang, Henry II of England didn't get along with his gay son Richard the Lion-hearted. And the Hebrew bible as a whole is nothing but the story of family squabbles of the worst kind possible kind from Genesis all the way to Malachi. You don't have to look far to find similar stories throughout history. Yet despite such realities, loneliness has dogged me all my life, especially when I have been witness to families where fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters, to all appearances, all got along famously and beautifully... by comparison. Including several families in Rockford. And in this church.

My father, like Luther's father, called me *stubborn* all the time too...but then so did the nuns at school, so he may have had a point. My father always wondered aloud in front of other people, like Hans did of his son Martin Luther, why I was so *different* from other kids, which always left me shamed. But still, I wonder if Luther in the play has a point *at least in the most general of*

terms... Maybe fathers and sons do always disappoint each other? Hmm... That's the central word, isn't it? *Disappointment*. My poor father genuinely worried about me as a sexual minority, as a man going into a profession he had never heard of before, as a man who preferred to go with his grandpa to see an opera than to take up the bat and ball of Little League. How would he explain these differences to his friends and relatives? How could he reconcile this shame with his often stated expectation of what I would be...a man, married like him to a wonderful woman, a man with children, living in the burbs in a ranch home, with a profession that gave me financial security enough and with enough left over for a Detroit Tiger game or two. And I suppose I had expectations too...of a father that wanted me for who I actually am, who was glad for my development in the world, who encouraged me when I learned to paint, or took a course of study and practice that led to my ordination; or yes, even when I fell in love. But after many years I gave up expecting that my father would suddenly fulfill my expectation, since I knew from sufficient experience that it was not even a possible hope. And this is the second thing I want to observe about family squabbles.

You see, we were both "right"...my father and I...he was right to be concerned about my welfare in this undeniably harsh and unfair world...there is nothing wrong about such concern that I can think of; *and* I was right to be who I was, to be honest about my life and my desired work. For as Betty Smith in the first reading put it, the worse squabbles are not between people who are both wrong, but between people who are both right. And in the end, perhaps like Luther and his father Hans, we ended up making do with the realities that we were both right, but right in completely different worlds that barely overlapped. So I sat at the holiday table with everyone despite his volcanic anger about most everything and expressions of shame. He kissed me hello and good bye, and told me he loved me, which I certainly believed he did in the way he understood that word. I helped him, sometimes in vain, to learn to deal with relatives with addiction issues, but I really tried. He came to my sermons when he was in town, always surprised anew that I had the guts to get up in front of other people every week and hold forth. And I was as kind to him as he was dying as I could be. We made do. He and I made do.

What do I make of all this? Three things:

1. That families are shaped by the expectations, the "pictures" held by members of those families. Now of course, no one imagines *bad* families...like biblical Abraham sending his son Ishmael and his mother to die out in the desert...they always imagine kind families with everyone at the dinner table happy. But people may imagine people sitting around that dinner table for different reasons. Maybe parents might expect their families will be exactly like the one they grew up in, or exactly the opposite of the one they grew up in, depending. And if their children don't see that, they may not understand, or even be able to figure out what to do... until...if they can get there... they decide to give up their "pictures," their expectations, and deal with reality, that is, what's actually there in front of their eyes. May Luther's protest in the play is important to remember here... no child can justify a parent's life.

2. Some histories of family squabbles can be healed, by therapy; by time; even by unexpected changes in outlook that surprise everyone. It happens. My mother changed in many surprising ways after my father died. Others simply cannot be healed, at least in the mere course of a lifetime, and so you have to make do as best you can...if you can. That's what I did. And what I

believe my father did. But, if even that is not possible, I assure you, there can be no shame in not being able to do that. We can do only what we can do. To have the conviction that all family breakdowns can be healed and made right by the “right words” or “right actions” is not always a shining ideal it pretends to be, but more of an example of a broken faith, at least as far as I am concerned.

3. Most families have down-times when people don't get along, or they squabble, or irk each other. If any one expects they can avoid such times in their family life, they are in for a rude awakening. I've never found an exception yet. Downtimes and squabbles *always* happen. *But* most of the time these squabbles are the kind depicted in the children's story this morning. I don't know why mommy was mad in that story, and her kids didn't either. I don't know why she didn't kiss her husband goodbye on his way to work. I don't know why her mood changed, but none of that really matters. The kids dealt with it the best way they could, actually, once they realized they hadn't caused it. I think my sister and I both used to wonder when our mother was in a mood if we had somehow caused it, but mostly we were smart enough to trust our eyes and ears and realize that we hadn't. So then, like the kids in the story, we would cajole her, and soon a smile would cross her face and she would be back to normal. She had, as the phrase puts it so well... “woken up on the wrong side of the bed.” And we reminded her that we loved her and wanted her back, and she opened up and stepped back in. Most squabbles, in other words, are just part of the territory. Not to worry.

As I get older, and hear more and more life stories in my work, I realize that ministerial internships, where you learn about the family issues which ministry eventually addresses, never really end, in 1977 in Rockford Illinois, or any other year or place. No. It's all learning, all the time. There is no way for me *not* to be an apprentice: no way for me NOT to be learning about family systems, learning about life and love, and learning about reality itself, day after day, year after year. Why, I wonder, because of a few graduation ceremonies, did I ever think otherwise?

Offering

What gift can we bring? Our presence. Our humility. Our teachableness. Our self-questioning. Our risking. Our hope. Our ideals. Our conversations. Our faithfulness. Our financial support, either given in more modern ways behind the scenes, or offered in this more ancient way as an integral part of our celebration. The ushers are invited forward.

Gentle Prayer

The stories today are at their end now.
The world goes on, though.
Purple irises will still bloom,
the sun and moon will still shine,
no matter what our stories are,
no matter what thickens our memory,
no matter the unanswered questions.
Time to turn from tales of quarrels
to dreams of peace.
Oh Love, our vision and our compass,

it's time to lift up from this moment,
and to sing a daytime lullaby
to our ever new-born days and dreams....

#1057 Go, Lifted Up