

Every Family Has a Story

From the series: Christian Faith: Interpretations of Experience

Text: Deuteronomy 6:6-7, 6:20; Mark 3:19b; Acts 1:14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

I was given a tape of an interview on National Public Radio, of a novelist, Jim Crace, an Englishman. In the course of the interview, which was about his recent novel, *Quarantine*, which he has written recently and which centers on the temptation experience of Jesus in the Judean wilderness, I was struck by the fact that Jim Crace, who wrote the story about the temptation of Jesus, is himself an atheist. And he is a very articulate and intentional atheist. He's not an angry atheist, but he is, by conviction, a person who believes that the scientific explanation of reality and its purely naturalistic fashion is sufficient for him, and he lives comfortably with that view of the totality of things. But, what struck me was his recognition that atheism and any kind of scientific naturalism has failed to develop ceremonies and rituals and celebrations that can elicit awe and wonder, and cultivate that depth dimension in the human person. That came up in the interview when he told that, as his father, who is also an atheist, was approaching his death, he had said, "No priest, no music, no ritual." They grew up, of course, in that grand Anglican tradition where the liturgy sort of permeates the air and his father, obviously, was a very deliberate atheist who wanted none of the folderol at his death and burial. Well, the son felt a lack, but what impressed me was the fact that, once again, the apple doesn't fall very far from the tree. A good, intentional, deliberate, articulate atheist produces a good, articulate atheist son. You can point to exceptions to that fact, of course, all about you, but the exceptions prove the rule. As a matter of fact, the apples don't fall very far from the tree, and it is, therefore, the claim upon us by our Christian tradition that we keep telling the story to keep the faith alive.

Every family has a story. We have a story together and we have a story individually in our respective families, and on this Mother's Day when we focus on the family, I do want us to understand how important are our family stories. As we have been saying these weeks, in this Eastertide series, our tradition, the Christian tradition in our case, is the consequence of a foundational event that finds expression and symbols and images that have developed into a story that eventually is conceptualized and systematized, but is really kept alive and is shaping and determinative of ongoing generations by the story itself. We have a

story. We keep telling the story and the generations, one following another, hearing the story, are shaped by the story and by the story are given lens through which to understand life, to interpret the meaning of human existence. The stories that we have received, that have shaped us and that we pass along are terribly important. This is a critical matter. I don't know what would be more critical in the midst of the congregation as we think about being a part of the Christian tradition than to be reminded of the critical nature of storytelling, passing on the faith by reciting the story.

We Christians are relatively new kids on the block. The Christian tradition came out of the Jewish tradition and, whenever we think about these things, we rather naturally go to the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy where we have a classic package - the creed which had been crystallized and made concise, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord." Yahweh, our God. This is our God.

That creedal statement is set in the context in which Israel is commanded to love the Lord with their whole being, to keep the commandments in their heart, that is, all of the ordinances and the statutes and the rituals, the liturgies, the prayers, all of that which make up the religions experience - keep it in your heart, and recite it. Tell it to your children. Talk to your children about it all the time. Talk to your children as you're going along the way, when you rise up, when you sit down. Put it on the doorpost of your house so that every time you go out, you touch the doorpost and are reminded of the *Shema*, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one." In other words, be so saturated, so drenched in the consciousness of our God that the whole atmosphere is controlled, conditioned by that spiritual reality. One is, at it were, drenched with spirituality to the cultivation of a consistent, continual consciousness of God in one's life. And a little kid exposed to that doesn't have a chance. That's essentially what Israel learned, found out, and that's why Israel continues to be a vital reality, a living reality, a living people today.

What are they? Not a race. They're not a tribe. There is again a nation, but finally, they are a *People*. They are people with a story and they have magnificently kept that story, and all of that religious tradition intact, practicing it, observing it, and continuing their struggle to preserve it.

Jesus was a part of the Jewish People - an observant Jew. On this Mother's Day I am pointing to the fact that the family is where tradition is observed and kept alive. That is a challenge. It takes serious commitment. The family, in whatever configuration we find it, is the key place for telling the story and passing on the tradition.

We get just little hints of Jesus' own experience in the New Testament. Mary, in the Gospel of Luke, is this beautiful maiden in total submission to the word of the Lord brought by the angel that she will bear this one conceived by the Holy Spirit. And then she, with Joseph, does everything for Jesus, according to the Law. All of the ritual, all of the requirements are fulfilled. Then the next thing we find is that

Jesus is off on his own, in his own ministry, and we have an interesting episode in Mark, the third chapter, where the word is out that Jesus has gone off the deep end, that Jesus is demon-possessed, beside himself, meaning literally in that day that he had possession of some kind of spirit. And so, Mary and his brothers go off to get Jesus. They want to bring him home. Obviously, there's tension and there is alienation and estrangement because Jesus doesn't budge, Jesus doesn't move, even though his mother is outside.

Mothers have a way of expecting their children to respond, to obey, to follow their word. One of my favorite mother stories is when I presented myself to my own mother for the first time with a beard. I had grown a beard in Europe and since I couldn't grow it any other place, I thought it looked good, and the day before I came home to see my mother, I shaved it off. (I had other problems; I didn't need that one.) But, after a couple of years, on the way to Florida, Nancy looked at me and said, "You didn't shave." I said, "I didn't shave and I didn't bring my razor." I thought, you know, at one time I needed the whole Atlantic Ocean to separate me from my mother to dare to grow the beard, but now Florida would be enough distance. But, when I got back and she saw me for the first time, she said, "I don't like it, Dick. Shave it off."

Now, I'm a grown man. But, I can imagine Mary saying, "Jesus, come home."

My mother said, "Shave it off. I don't like it."

Well, I gave her a hug and then probably another three or four weeks later I saw her again and I still had the beard. She was quite nonplused, not really believing her eyes. She said, "I told you to shave that off."

Well, Nancy was enjoying it a bit and thought she'd add a little fuel to the fire, so she said, "You know what else he's doing now, Mother?" And my mother said, "Don't tell me."

Nancy said, "He's now sitting on a stool to preach."

My mother looked at me as if to say, "Tell me it isn't true."

I said to her, "Mother, do you know that Jesus had a beard?"

She said, "He did?"

I said, "Yes." And I said, "Mother, do you know how he preached?"

She said, "No."

I said, "Well in the 4th chapter of Luke, he reads scripture and he sits down to preach." She said, "He did?"

I said, "Yes, and, Mother, from a child you have taught me to be like Jesus and I'm doing the best I can."

I will never forget the absolute certainty with which she said to me, "Dick, shave off that beard." And the next time when I came and hadn't done it, she could not believe I hadn't obeyed. I imagine it was that way with Jesus. He is handed a note, "Your mother's outside." He says, "My mother? Who is my mother? My mother is those who do the will of God."

I'm glad that John, the 4th Gospel, gets Mary and Jesus back together at the cross, although he speaks of her as "Woman," hardly the kind of thing that warms the cockles of a mother's heart on Mother's Day. That's why I read that little paragraph from Acts. Following the Ascension, that early community, the disciples gathered praying, waiting for power from on high and there's Mary and there's his brothers and sisters.

The reconciliation and the coming together - that's not so easy. It's a very, very difficult thing, as a matter of fact. I think it's part of God's wisdom and perhaps his humor that he makes us live in families. We can choose our friends - parents are a given. And our children are a given. And our brothers and sisters are a given. And that's why, close as we are, living in that close, intimate proximity, we allow ourselves to be revealed in all of our humanity. It is in that mix that we have a story to tell and it is that story that shapes us, forms us, and it's so critically important that we tell the story and pass on the faith. That's the only way it happens.

I want you just to think about it this morning, how important that is. We have had a rather unruly worship service this morning. I kind of like high church Anglicanism, myself, but I do get misty-eyed when I see those children, and when I see those children, I realize what a treasure is the community in which they are present, and what a responsibility to nurture them, to tell them the story so that the story becomes their story, so that the story shapes them and, in turn, gives them lens through which to understand who they are, from whence they have come, whither they are going and what is the meaning of it all.

Don't you love the passage in Deuteronomy? When your son or daughter says, "What do these things mean?" then you have a teaching moment, a wonderful opportunity. And what do you do? You don't get out the catechism. You tell the story. You say, "Our fathers and mothers were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt and God brought you out ..." You tell the story. And the story becomes that which is remembered every year, annually in festival, in ceremony and ritual, and the story shapes the community, it keeps the faith alive.

That's so terribly important. Just hear me say that this morning.

Now, how are you doing? Not just parents with active children, but parents who had children long ago and now have grandchildren. How are we doing? How are you doing it?

I think it used to be a simpler matter, although maybe it never was an easy matter. For example, when my parents told me the story, they were dead certain there was only one story. You're going to have to tell your children, with compassionate commitment to the story, that it's not the only story. It's *our* story. It's the story that has shaped us and formed us in which we find our hope and the grace of God. We don't want to build walls for them that need not be built, or that need later to be torn down.

You have to give it proper priority. What is proper priority? Well, I don't know what to tell you. I could make you feel very guilty right now, because who of us doesn't know that we've been lousy at the job? I could tell you stories of years ago when Mr. Bryson on Saturday morning had Choir School. I could tell you even more ancient tales of when I went to catechism on Saturday morning, so that the next time you run to the soccer field on Saturday morning, you might think, "Hmm. Soccer rather than catechism; soccer rather than choir school. I wonder about my priorities." I wish at some point I saw as much commitment to the spiritual nurture of children as I see to soccer on Saturday morning. But, in all honesty, I have to say that for kids who go to school Monday through Friday, then to bring them to catechism on Saturday morning must be a form of child abuse. So, as a grandparent, I'm glad that my kids didn't get warped enough to damage their children.

But, how are we doing it? *What* are we doing? Are we doing it? Does it have proper priority? And then, do it with passion and grace. That means you don't, like Mary, go rushing off to bring the kid home. Your passion is felt; they've got to feel your passion, but laced with grace. There's a different feel, then, and there's a different feel because you are trusting the process, which is another way of saying you're trusting the Spirit. Or, let me say it this way - what you do, do for yourself. Be genuine and authentic in your own choice and expression. That will be perceived. That will be communicated. That will catch, sometime, some place, believe me.

And then, let me say that what I see in you moves me deeply. I honestly believe my children are better parents than I was. What I see in your families in the respective arenas in which you live and in this arena in which children are being nurtured, I see a commitment that is deep and wonderful, and I think you are doing a marvelous job.

Traditioning, instilling the faith story must be recognized for the critical nature of which it is. It must be given priority. It must be laced with passion and grace. But, I want to say, you are doing a really good job, I believe. Parents, grandparents - I see a wonderful commitment to those beautiful children, and I believe that there is grace in the end of it all.

You want a nice Mother's Day story? Betty's mother is going to have surgery tomorrow. It was a little over a year ago when Betty came out of church one day and said, "We're going to see my mother whom I've never seen before." She had finally found her mother! Betty and Norma went down and found her mother, brought her home, and Betty P. found out that her name was Elizabeth Grace. What a name! Is it any wonder that on this Mother's Day that Elizabeth Grace says, "Pray for my mother," because after decades, there is reunion, there is love, there is grace. Beautiful!

Now, go out and love each other.