

LOVING AND RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD: OUR CALL IN CHRIST JESUS

Easter 6 / Mother's Day – Cycle B: John 17:6-19 (Gospel for Easter 7)

Family Life Educator Barbara Coloroso recommends car trips for difficult conversations between parents and children. She notes that for particularly uncomfortable talks, such as educational chats about sex, children and teenagers are a captive audience as long as the car is moving; and she likes that you don't have to make eye contact in the car in the awkward moments.

It was over 20 years ago that my mother and I had one of those car conversations, not about sex, but rather about the years of my individuation, my late teens and early twenties. And it was not she who was having the conversation with me, but I who was putting her on the spot. We had just concluded a funeral home visitation for my cousin Mary in London: I had driven to St. Thomas, picked up my mother at her home, and the two of us went to London to spend the evening with my cousin Ron, Mary's son. Our talk happened on the way back to St. Thomas.

Twenty years ago, I had been a parent long enough myself to reflect on how much worry I had undoubtedly caused both my parents during my years at university when I often didn't return home until 4:30 in the morning. And then after graduation when I had moved to Brantford, they knew that I would think nothing of heading out in my car to Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, or Kingston. This kid from St. Thomas, population 20,000 during most of my formative years, fearless and unbounded in my exploration of big cities and the highways and back roads of Ontario and Quebec: I was every parent's worst nightmare, I expect.

"How did you do it?" I asked my mother. "You must have been worried sick wondering where I was and what I was up to? All those late nights when I could have been in an accident or worse; all those long trips when I never called to check in: I was just gone for days, weeks? And you never said a word to me about the wear and tear and lost sleep I was causing you and Dad?" There was a pause. My guess is that she never expected to have this conversation with me and was not necessarily grateful for the opportunity right then. After what seemed to me like an eternity, she said very quietly, "Early on, when you started living life on your own terms, I realized that I could do nothing other than give you over into God's care. I prayed to God, asking that he would guard and protect you; that he would keep you safe."

It was my turn for silence. My father had always been the one in our family who expressed his faith openly; my mother always seemed to me to be a little more worldly, a little less serious. Now she was showing me that her faith was radical and sure – and that she had no difficulty relying on it when the wellbeing of her loved ones was at stake. I often think of the peace of God which passes all understanding, that grace-filled calm in the middle of a storm of stress and anxiety that defies all reason; and in recalling this conversation I had with my mother on that rainy night in the car on the backstreets of London, Ontario, half a lifetime ago, I realize that my mother found that peace in prayer and devotion.

It was Jesus' pastoral prayer in John 17 and the coincidence of Mother's Day that brought all of this to mind. In his prayer, Jesus is aware that his adversaries are moving against him, and that he can no longer watch over and protect his followers. And so he prays the prayer my mother prayed, asking God to protect them, guard them from all evil, and keep them in the truth of the gospel. It is a prayer, not only for their physical safety, but for their moral and spiritual care. Jesus knows he can do nothing; that both he and they are in God's hands now, and that God's love is enough for all and any of their needs; for all and any of our needs.

Traditionally, Jesus' pastoral prayer in John 17 has been heard as a prayer for the church, especially the part about unity – "Holy Father...may they be one as we are one;" and the part about the church's sanctification in him: "...For their sakes," he prays, "I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth." His so-called "sanctification" is his walking the way of the cross, because it is in his dying and his rising again that God's love, our "sanctification" is revealed. "Because he lives, we also shall live" the apostle Paul wrote to his beloved protégé, Timothy. (2 Timothy 2:11)

Without question, these are challenging times – for the church, for families, for society, and for our world. We love control and predictability, and there is no place, it seems, that can offer us much more than a provisional guarantee which, of course, is no guarantee. Tennessee Ernie Ford used to end his weekly television show with the epigram, "I'll see ya right back here next week if the good Lord's willin' and the

creek don't rise." I can remember thinking to myself that that wasn't much of a promise; and as it happened, it was NBC that took him off the air after a five-year run – no heavenly call and no high water involved. How often in our world do we trivialize God by invoking God's name, rather than genuinely responding to God in trust and hope!

By contrast, prayer is different, much different. In prayer, we earnestly seek God, and the Holy Spirit increases our faith by praying in us. In prayer, God lives and works in and through us, blessing the many, calling us to service, stilling us with peace, inspiring us to trust. In prayer, our deep desires meet the grace of God and we discover the courage to hope.

Loving and responsible parents and grandparents provide for the spiritual formation of their children. It is highly probable that most of us are here this morning because our parents or grandparents prayed and trusted in God. Our call in Christ Jesus, especially in this magnificent example John has given us in this morning's Gospel, is to do no less than turn to God in prayer; trust in God's mercy, especially in times of great need; and by our living faith and deep-seated devotion to commend to our children and grandchildren what we ourselves have received. Jesus models faith in God that we also might model faith in God. In so doing, we find our unity in Christ; in so doing, our "mystic sweet communion" with God is ours, here-and-now, not only in the world to come.

The church calendar identifies Mother's Day and Father's Day as Christian Family Sundays. In doing so, it suggests that Christ is present in our families and in the parent-child relationships that shape and form us as the children of God. It suggests that not only our families, but all that we have and all that we are, as a genuine place for faith. It suggests that we can learn from our brother Jesus how we are called into the world to love one another, care for one another, and pray for one another; and how we are called into the world to be his church.