

Remembering My Father

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Genesis 32:22-26

This is Father's Day, a day that has always produced mixed emotions for me. Periodically throughout my tenure with you, I have spoken about my father and his influence on me and on my ministry. This morning, I hope that you will allow me the opportunity to, once again, reflect on his life, and the impact he has made on me, his son.

My father was the personification of what you would call “a successful Quaker minister.” He put his Meeting and community and his fellow humans above himself, and he never deviated from that path. Unfortunately, there were also many times that he put others above his own family. His statement, “I am married to the church” was one that I would hear often during my growing years, and one that was very disturbing to my mother's feelings.

In an editorial in the *Muncie, Indiana Star Newspaper*, on the day of his memorial service, the editor wrote about my father, a piece that is framed and on a book shelf in the office. He said, “Newby died last week at the comparatively young age of 62, yet his record of accomplishments is long and distinguished. He accumulated that record by never flinching from accepting responsibility, regardless of whether the request was from his church, community or from the downtrodden and less-fortunate who sought his counsel and friendship...He was a thoughtful and inspiring speaker. His sermons were carefully researched and meticulous in their preparation. Two published volumes of those sermons remain as his legacy...Also part of that legacy is the affection he engendered in those who knew him and the respect in which he was held by his church and community. No person can expect more than that.”

My father was a man of principles and integrity. When he served as the Chair of the Muncie, Indiana Human Relations Council, he worked hard to integrate local businesses and tone down the racist

rhetoric in a community that was racially divided. My favorite story of his acting on his principles, one which I have shared with you before, was the time he confronted a man who was flying the confederate flag from his front porch. I was a young boy, traveling with him down Madison Ave. in Muncie, Indiana, when suddenly he stopped the car, and told me to stay seated while he walked up to the front door of a rather scary looking house. A man came to the door, and my father started talking to him. After a few minutes, my father returned to the car, and the man at the house started to take down the confederate flag that he was flying. I asked my father what he had said, and he replied, "I told the man that that flag he was flying on his front porch represented a lot of hurt in our country, and to a large segment of our community the flag stood for slavery and hatred. I told him that he had every right to fly it, but it would help settle some of the racial tensions in our community if he took it down." Surprisingly, out of respect for my father, the man took it down.

My father was not a man of wealth, and although we never knew it, he reared his family just above the poverty line. One of the perks in his ministry at the Minneapolis Friends Meeting was that he and his family had first takes on the clothing that was in the missionary barrel for shipment to Kenya. As I got older, I felt guilty about wearing clothes that some poor African child could have been wearing!

He was a Quaker Pacifist, never flinching from his heartfelt belief that Jesus was right when He taught His followers, “Love Your Enemies.” He was a Conscientious Objector during World War II, which was a courageous position to take in those days, often resulting in him being ostracized and/or beaten by those who disagreed with his position. He did alot of hitchhiking as a college student at William Penn College in Iowa, and he would often catch a ride with a truck driver. If the driver was a Christian, my father would invariably challenge the driver's beliefs about the war, and

talk about Jesus' statement to love our enemies. Many times he was thrown out of the vehicle, and not very delicately!

He was a man who as a child experienced near death as a result of Scarlet Fever and Rheumatic Fever. He would tell the story of being in his bed sick, and hearing the doctor outside his room telling his mother to prepare for his death. And yet he survived, for which I am personally grateful!

His childhood was not a happy one. Due to his illnesses he was absent from school for long periods of time, thus he had no real close friends. Each Valentine's Day as we were growing up, he would repeat the sad story about being in his classroom while all of the children in his class were exchanging cards, and he did not receive even *one*. The lesson for his own children was to make sure that we had cards for *everyone* in our classes.

There was also the time when, as a young boy, he was standing by the edge of a field watching a group of boys play football. Because of his unhealthy heart, he was never allowed to play sports, but he

loved to watch. On this particular occasion, as the boys broke from their huddle they all came running over to tackle my father and beat him. A sad childhood, indeed...

*The spirituality of remembrance...*the stories, the memories and pictures in the mind, are all there. I am sure that I am a Quaker minister because of my father's influence. Each week while at home I would sit in his congregation, listening to his sermons, and when he wasn't looking, I would mimic his preaching style. At the time of his death, he had written two books of sermons, titled, *Spiritual Fire* and *Life Is To Be Celebrated*. We knew that we loved each other, my father and I, we just never *said* that we loved each other. And before this neglect could be corrected, he was gone. In many ways we were, in the words of the Playwright, Moss Hart, "Two lonely people struggling to reach each other."

In the passage from Genesis, I read about Jacob wrestling with God, there is one particular line that is especially meaningful to me: *"Then he said, 'let me go for the day is breaking.' But Jacob said, 'I*

will not let you go, unless you bless me.’” Friends, how many sons and daughters have felt this same way about their fathers or mothers? All children want the blessing of their parents. And seeking that blessing can, at times, feel like a wrestling match. *“I will not let you go, unless you bless me.”*

And so this morning, I encourage those of you who are fathers and mothers to bless your children, and those of you who are children to be forgiving of your parents. I know that I need forgiveness, and I know that my father needed it as well.

My father is no longer physically among us, and I know that this is the case for many of you. Some of his words, however, live on in his writings. I want to close this message of remembrance with my father's own words found in his message, *“The Triumph of Spirit Over Body.”* He writes: “We cannot find full answers to the questions of life...death, pain and evil, for they are mysteries of God. Yet it should be our faith that God’s love is greater than any other force known to humans and we believe that we are bound

together by that force now and throughout eternity...It is this divine love that will ever keep dear loved ones and friends with us, even though invisible. We can join hands with them, for there is no separation in God's family."