

Mom Always Liked You Best

Yesterday was Epiphany, the day the church has designated to acknowledge the story of the visit of the Magi. It's recorded in the second chapter of Matthew. To Matthew, the story represents the revealing of Christ to the world. God no longer belongs exclusively to Israel. Israel had some difficulty with it.

LUKE 4:16-28 (NRSV) *When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

¹⁸*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,*

¹⁹*to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

²⁰*And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of*

him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

Do you remember Tommy Smothers' whimper, "Mom always like you best"? Tommy would say to Dickey, "You got to have dog! I never had a dog! I had a chicken! You can't teach a chicken to fetch! And all the kids laughed at me when the chicken followed me to school!"

Ah! Sibling Rivalry; it's so interesting to watch. And remember: in sibling disputes, "the issue is never the issue". You have something, and I don't—I may not even want it. But that's not the point.

I remember Christmas mornings growing up. My sister is five years younger than I, and our interests were different. She liked "Saucy Walker" and I liked dump trucks; so, there was never a problem.

But, over at my cousins' house it was different. We alternated Christmases: their house - our house. There were five of them—two boys, three girls—and the biggest age difference between any two of them was twenty months! When they opened their presents on Christmas morning, it was always with one eye on what the others got. Just checking...

I saw many a pouting lower lip before Christmas morning was over; and more than once I heard my Aunt say, "But don't you like what you got? Didn't you get what

you asked for? Then why does it matter what Bobby got?"

"But his is bigger!"

A new baby comes into a family and one who's been the center of attention sees that position threatened, and relationships within the family are changed forever. Now, toys must be shared, and maybe a room. And, for sure, Mom's attention must be shared. There's always the question: "What if Mom loves the new baby more than she loves me?"

If that issue is not resolved by adolescence, it often becomes neurotic. I recall the TV series from a decade ago: "Sisters." There were some lighthearted moments—moments of tenderness—even celebration; but, generally, the stories revolved around three women who happened, genetically, to be sisters, but whose relationships and personalities reflected a dysfunctional family system.

The writers were very skilled at the use of "flashbacks", and in moments of high conflict a flashback would give insight into the origin of the conflict—usually some manifestation of the fear, "Mom always liked you best."

Now, imagine an entire race of people demonstrating that same neurosis, but not about "Mom." Israel considered themselves Children of God; and there were no sibling rivalry problems. As far as they were concerned, Israel was an 'only child'.

From the beginning it was made clear—to everyone, apparently, but them—that they were God's chosen people; but they were not God's only children. From the first covenant with Abraham, 2,100 years before Christ—it was clear that this would not be an exclusive relationship. Here is what God said to Abraham:

"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples of the earth will be blessed through you." (GENESIS 12:3 NIV)

Isaiah, 750 years before the birth of Jesus, was preaching, *"In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it."* (ISAIAH 2:2 NIV)

So, Jesus began his ministry. He went to his hometown synagogue and was asked to read the morning scripture from Isaiah: *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* (LUKE 4:18-19 NIV)

It was a familiar passage; many of them had memorized it as children. But Jesus gave it a new twist. They understood it to mean they were the poor; they were the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed. They were the ones God loved. They were the ones Messiah would come to set free. "God always liked us best!"

But now Jesus says, "No. God already has declared His love for us—again and again! Now, Isaiah says we are the ones sent to do the preaching of the good news—to

be the demonstration of God's love to all people!"

When asked, "Which of your children do you love best?" one wise mother replied, "The one who has a fever, while he has the fever; the one who is hurting, while she is hurting."

God's love, like a mother's love, is responsive. When a mother shows attention to one child, it doesn't mean she loves the other(s) less. But too often, God's children, like Mom's children, forget all past expressions of love when attention for the moment is on another. The Jews—and particularly the Pharisees—were unwilling to risk what they considered their favored status with God; so, they continued to deny the identity of others as their brothers and sisters, and continued to criticize Jesus for accepting them.

A TV reporter asked the poet, Carl Sandburg, "Mr. Sandburg, what in your opinion is the ugliest word in the English language?"

Fred Craddock said, "I was interested because I grew up with 'ugly words.' My mother's list of ugly words included taking God's name in vain, cursing, swearing and using profanity. This long list of ugly words came back to mind when the reporter asked, 'What is the ugliest word?'

"Mr. Sandburg was about to speak. I grew more anxious as he grew more deliberate. 'The ugliest word in the English language is exclusive.' He said no more; he did not explain his choice or attempt to justify it. His face said it all—what could be uglier? On a slip of paper, I wrote 'exclusive.'

"I dared not speak it lest my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth. As I sit here years later I can hardly say the word, it is so ugly. And when I think the word, I feel I should wash my mind out with soap." ~ Dr. Fred B. Craddock

Many of the parables of Jesus are his way of describing God's love as responsive—when the shepherd went out to look for that one lost sheep, he first made sure the other 99 were safe in the fold. When the woman searched for that one lost coin, she didn't throw out the other coins to make room in her purse for the one that was lost. And when the father went out to greet the returning Prodigal Son, he was able to do so wholeheartedly because he knew the other son was safe at home.

And notice what happens in every case: when the shepherd finds the lost sheep, when the woman finds the lost coin, when the prodigal son returns: every time, they throw a party—and invite everyone they know.

The people to whom Jesus told those parables should have known these things—already—and should have been out telling the story themselves.

For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to

proclaim him?" (ROMANS 10:13-14)

God has enough love to go around. It's so high you can't get over it; so low you can't get under it; so wide you can't get around it. You've got to go in at the door. And the door is always open. But who will tell the story?