

Preaching and the Missing Parent

Freda A. Gardner

Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

Those of us who claim education as one of our primary languages speak of the explicit, the implicit, and the null curriculums. Those of you for whom education is not your second language can figure out what is meant by the explicit and the implicit curriculum. The first, that which is intended and attended to, and the second, that which is operative through architecture, arrangements of people and resources and the like. The null curriculum refers to that which is *not* spoken of or valued, may even be chosen against, and thereby teaches by its absence rather than its presence. Schools that have no programs in the arts or no places within the physical structure that invite or even suggest relaxation or solitude, churches whose education programs never include or refer to sexuality or politics . . . such as these teach things which would probably never be claimed in statements of purpose or mission or in any form of direct proclamation or teaching.

Looking for what isn't there is not something that all people do naturally or regularly. Some of us have all we can do to keep up with the obvious. Even when we sense that something might be missing, we often can't name it much less question its absence. Or, as is the case with some children, education or the ways of the family may have so brutalized or paralyzed them that there is not even resentment at being so treated and often no anger that they have been deprived of something essential to their well-being. Somewhat less abused children and adults may be wounded or hostile because a love for poetry, or a deep and needed appreciation for reflection, or for the opportunity to discover on one's own *has been not just ignored* but often demeaned. And such people learn, often for life, what most schools and many families and most churches would not generally claim as their intent.

The Bible is replete with stories with missing pieces. The story of Jephthah's daughter might serve as an example of the null curriculum. To be sure, the pieces that are there are worthy of our attention, but the more attention we give, the greater is the likelihood that we, or some of us at least, will wonder about the missing ones.

In her book, *Just A Sister Away*, Renita Weems calls this story one of devotion: a man's devotion to his God and a daughter's devotion to her father. But, Weems points out, this noble concept goes awry: nobility turns into a nightmare and devotion into death.

Jephthah was an outcast, even though he was recognized as a skilled warrior and leader. The circumstances of his birth, resulting in his banishment from his father's house, seem to have turned him into a person of great, if not boundless, ambition, not always tempered, perhaps, by reason. Given an opportunity for leadership by the elders of Gilead, Jephthah wants so much more that he uses the occasion to bargain with God. Jephthah made a vow to the

Lord, and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering" (Judges 11:30-31). Weems, asks, whom did Jephthah expect to come out to greet him? If not his daughter, then surely some member of his household. A reckless vow laden with the promise of pain. But what does he do with the pain? When he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me . . ." (Judges 11:35). Today we call it "blaming the victim."

Don't we have to wonder about this nameless daughter's mother? Can't you feel yourself waiting for her to come through the door to greet her returning husband or, when it is her daughter for whom Jephthah's vow becomes a death sentence, exploding into the scene to intervene in this absurdity? Doesn't something in us strain to hear her reason with this man or to suggest a substitute sacrifice to God, or to simply scream out her anguish at the fate that has come to her child? Or maybe we wait to hear her say the daughter's name over and over in a litany of pain that many of us might recognize. We have a no-name sacrifice even though the daughter's request for two months of lamenting the end of life with her friends perhaps inaugurated the profession of mourning for ancient women. No name but also no mother. Don't we have to wonder about the meaning of what is missing, especially the missing parent, the null curriculum of this experience?

Lest anyone think that I'm trying to make a point for a Mother's Day sermon, which I have been told is one of the most difficult preaching tasks of the year, let me wonder a bit about Timothy too. For those who have found some of Paul's teachings extremely provocative, if not hopelessly alienating, the first verses of second Timothy might seem like a gift. To have Timothy's grandmother and mother named and acknowledged as those whose faith was now also in him, with the implication that they might have had something to do with it being so, might ring joyfully in ears battered by Paul's admonitions about the place and role of women in the home and church. But what is missing? Commentators tell us that Timothy was from Lystra in Asia Minor, son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother who had become a Christian. Now Paul, like all of us who speak or write, was trying to make his own point, to be sure, but don't you wonder about Timothy's father? about his role in the family and in the shaping of Timothy's life? about the way he dealt with a wife and mother-in-law (or maybe Lois was his mother?) who were converts . . . maybe his wife converted after their marriage so that he found himself with a different wife from the one he married?

Leaving out one parent in any narrative or story of life may seem to make figuring out what's going on in a family neater and easier . . . but not really. A missing parent and a set of secrets are not simply neutral factors in self or family discovery and awareness. Timothy's father and the mother of Jephthah's daughter figured in their children's lives and were among those with whom their children had to do as they became the people they were.

Shortly after the meeting of the Presbyterian General Assembly this year, a young friend of mine (to a person my age, someone in her mid-twenties is a

young friend) was having breakfast and her eyes fell on the milk carton with its too familiar panel advertising missing children. She reported thinking that the carton might well carry a message for a missing God, for surely there were people who, in the wake of the Assembly, felt God's absence in a painful way. We can empathize with her reflection or we can reject it, but we cannot ignore the truth that God is simply missing from the lives of many today, more than a few in our own families, more than a few of those who in earlier times had known and loved and served God with us in the church.

I do not read the stories of Jephthah or Timothy as providing a clue for those who do not even know that God is missing, but I do see them providing a clue for those to whom God is known but not in the fullness in which God has been revealed, a less than whole God, a one-dimensional God, as one who appears to be missing that which might be the point of contact. Just as we may have done too small a reading of many biblical texts in the past and are, some of us, slowly and often painfully, trying to discipline ourselves to read from the underside and from the outside, to hear with others' ears and see with others' eyes . . . in just such a way might we wonder about the God we have proclaimed to others who is somehow incomplete for them? Is the missing parent in our Eternal Parent the very one who might be experienced by them as that for whom they have searched, as the fullness of the emptiness of their lives? Have we allowed our too small vision and language of God to set up a null curriculum, teaching what we might never want to claim and alienating those who hear what we do claim as less than good news?

Among the readers of this journal there have to be some who have been or are struggling with the rage and sense of betrayal that have marked your life since childhood when the other parent did not defend you against the abusing parent; there have to be some of us who still bear the scars of a childhood and adolescence robbed by shame and capricious relationships with an alcoholic parent; there have to be some of us who have been so well taught to value stoicism or control that we laugh or cry, get angry or feel passionate about anything with an overriding sense of guilt, if in fact we can entertain those emotions at all. One dominant, and one who was not there, one set of values and no room for anything else; and what if God comes to us as an either and not a both?

With what images of God did you grow up? When I was growing up, we attended a Reformed church in the town where my dad was the school principal. Even when my Presbyterian mother convinced him that we all ought to be in the Presbyterian church just outside of the town, we kept returning to that Reformed church for Thanksgiving services and other community and ecumenical events. In the back of the chancel of that church, there was a floor to ceiling stained glass window depicting Jesus the good shepherd. As a very young child, I identified with the lamb carried so tenderly in Jesus' arms. As a young adolescent, I was drawn to the rocky, thorny path under Jesus' bare feet. It wasn't until I was a young adult that I realized that the path seemed not to end at the base of the window but to extend across the floor, into our midst and beyond. No one taught me that, but what I was being taught helped me to see. As did my Scottish grandmother who lived to be ninety-nine and

often, in her eighties and nineties, lived with us. As she grew more and more deaf, her nightly prayers became louder and louder as she spoke to the God she seemed to know very well and who evidently knew her. Irreverently my sister and brother and I used to joke that Nanny was prepping for her finals; the joke was on us — she was, and she knew whom she'd meet, and we came to know that God too, different from whom we heard about in church. These and your memories may seem age-appropriate; they speak of our changing selves and of the new dimensions of our relationships with God that our changing lives need and are often given.

I have a friend who has been holding God accountable for what had happened to his wife. Recently, that same friend's best friend died at age forty-six of a parasite picked up in travel to Asia. If he only hears the voice of a one-Parent God, my friend may well decide that God is missing. He knows well and serves a sovereign God, and, to be sure, such a God may hold a trembling, crumbling world in place, often and for many, but, for others, and maybe for my friend, the majesty of such a God may be experienced only as distance or fatalism or even betrayal. Might a compassionate, grieving Parent reach my twice-wounded friend in ways that would grant him his anger, accept his hurt, and prepare him for the healing that takes account of the wounds?

Is it possible that there is divine purpose in what is missing in scripture? Are we invited to wonder about what is not said as a way to come to know for ourselves what God would have us know? Is it possible that the circumstances of our lives prompt us to seek a God who is always more than our names and images and depictions? Is it possible that the God we know in Jesus Christ yearns to be the parent to us who chooses to come to us according to our deepest needs and in ways that remind us that love and mercy and justice take the forms that minister to our cries and our celebrations? Is it possible that even today others who are missing God are waiting for us to name their missing parent in terms that they can understand? We who have ears to hear, let us hear . . . and we who have been granted the privilege to speak to others' lives, let us speak the truth we have been given.