

REDNECK MOTHERS, GOOD OL' BOYS AND GIRLS

Memories and Reflections on Mother's Day
While Thinking about I John 3:11-24

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"The floor is now open for nominations for Family of the Year."

It was the first sentence of the Mother's Day sermon. I had finished the reading of the New Testament selection, prayed the prayer, and started the sermon which was clearly indicated in the ordering of the service and entitled, "For Family of the Year, I Nominate. . . ." At least, I thought it was clear what was happening. It was not.

"The floor is now open for nominations for Family of the Year. Are there any nominations?"

I should have known better. As I paused for effect and time to give my fellow and sister worshipers a chance to wipe the indulgent smiles away, Mary Lynn stood in the congregation and said, "Mr. Moderator, I nominate the Albert Becker Family for Family of the Year!" I could not believe it. While I was still trying to recover my breath, she continued, "Oh, and the Malcolm Quick Family. They're nice, too!" That was Mother's Day 1979.

While it is true that Mother's Day, the Festival of the Christian Family, and the United Nation's Year of the Family have no biblical or liturgical basis, I am going to be prepared for whatever happens on May 11, 1980. And it will happen.

Mary Lynn, who listened that morning as I attempted to make a sermon sound like an endorsement of her nominations for Family of the Year, taught me something. She spoke out of a context. She did not understand my sermonic introduction, but she understood her own context, and the Beckers and the Quicks give her life a content of meaning and significance. As I prepare for this first Mother's Day of the 1980's, I am trying to touch the context of our lives. All of us speak out of a context, and I want to recognize the context of my own living, to reflect upon the context of the living of my sisters and brothers in the faith, and to respond to God's becoming within the processes of our context.

I. The Context: Impending Doom and Narcissism

The context of contemporary life is anything but confident. "Those who recently dreamed of world power now despair of governing the city of New York. Defeat in Vietnam, economic stagnation, and the impending exhaustion of natural resources have produced a mood of pessimism in higher circles, which spreads through the rest of society as people lose faith in their leaders."(1) Read that as the context of our living. Read the daily newspapers, listen to the talk on the jogging trails, watch the news on television, or just look out the windows of any middle or inner city church house. Confidence is at a low ebb, and there is no reason to think it will get any better.

Recently I was reading one of those "grocery store" magazines while waiting in

line. It was an article on heart attacks, and one of the "danger signals" caught me up short: "Have a check-up if you have a sense of impending doom." My Goodness! I need a perpetual check-up. Who does not have a "sense of impending doom"? A "sense of the ending" greets us at every corner today. All of us are growing older, inflation eats into our savings and cuts down our hedge against the aging process, our children are being asked to register for the draft again, the plans for boycotting the Olympics have been made, the institutions of cultural transmission are bankrupt in terms of effectiveness, and we are being told that the future will be a time of diminishing expectations. Impending doom! I'll say! Christopher Lasch says it better for us in The Culture of Narcissism:

The "sense of an ending," which has given shape to so much of twentieth-century literature, now pervades the popular imagination as well. The Nazi holocaust, the threat of nuclear annihilation, the depletion of natural resources, well-founded predictions of ecological disaster have fulfilled poetic prophecy. . . . The question of whether the world will end in fire or in ice, with a bang or a whimper, no longer interests artists alone. Impending disaster has become an everyday concern, so commonplace and familiar that nobody any longer gives much thought to how disaster might be averted. People busy themselves instead with survival strategies, measures designed to prolong their own lives, or programs guaranteed to ensure good health and peace of mind.(2)

Lasch goes on to suggest that our entire culture has responded to this sense of impending doom by retreating into itself. We have elevated jogging, self-awareness, health foods, dieting, etc.--all harmless perhaps in themselves--to the level of programs for personhood and individual authenticity and, along the way, retreated from political awareness and community responsibility. The result: The Culture of Narcissism.

As Mary Lynn spoke out of a context, so does Lasch. And that context is filled with anxiety. "The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. He seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others but to find a meaning in life. Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own experience."(3) Garp worried about his life, his children. He worried about those childhood accidents. "And what were they?" Garp wondered. Being hit by cars? Choking to death on peanuts? Being stolen by strangers? Cancer, for example, was a stranger." John Irving in The World According to Garp adds flesh and blood to the anxiety of our Culture of Narcissism:

There was so much to worry about, when worrying about children, and Garp worried so much about everything; at times, especially in these throes of insomnia, Garp thought himself too psychologically unfit for parenthood. Then he worried about that, too, and felt all the more anxious for his children. What if their most dangerous enemy turned out to be him?(4)

How I identify with that! Several days ago, very early in the morning hours, the dogs woke me up barking. I got up to check things out--you know, the locks on my memory, fantasies under the bed, fears in my nightmares. And my mind suddenly filled with things that are always barking to get in: two sons left in Texas--were

they safe, where were they this morning, are they behaving? Two sons here in Florida in strange schools with stranger schoolmates--were they happy, are they able to understand why I left Austin, Texas, and moved to Jacksonville, Florida? Our daughter is growing up and older--will she continue to be sweet and sensitive? Jane, my wife, is making new friends and finding her way around the city--does she still miss our old and dear friends, can she put roots down all over again, again, again? Inflation is eating up everything, the house (it used to be "home") in Texas is still sitting there unsold, owned by us, dragging us down into a hole of debt. The oldest son is driving his motorcycle again, in spite of the terrible accident last year. Three motorcycles in the family, four teenagers at the same time, one snake, four cats, three dogs, several hamsters, a couple of guinea pigs, no telling how many mice, etc. No wonder I could not sleep, there was simply too much in bed with me, too many things crawling around and tumbling over in my mind.

Does that sound like anyone you know, like anything you do? It does if your context is the same as mine, or Mary Lynn's, or Christopher Lasch's, or the Culture of Narcissism's.

I cannot imagine how it escaped notice in the "drug culture" for so long, but there is a song in the musical "Ain't Misbehavin'" by Thomas "Fats" Waller entitled "The Viper's Drag" or "The Reefer Song," written in 1934, which has this line: "I dreamed I found a Reefer five feet long/I got so high/ But don't worry/It didn't last for long!" And it didn't. Our cultural experience, however, tells us that we will continue to try to escape from facing that which is ending in our society.

We run deeper into self-absorption. Lasch quotes Andy Warhol in what has all the overtones of symbolic description:

Day after day I look in the mirror and I still see something--a new pimple . . . I dunk a Johnson and Johnson cotton ball into Johnson and Johnson rubbing alcohol and rub the cotton ball against the pimple . . . And while the alcohol is drying I think of nothing. How it's always in style. Always in good taste . . . When the alcohol is dry, I'm ready to apply the flesh-colored acne-pimple medication . . . So now the pimple's covered. But am I covered? I have to look into the mirror for some more clues. Nothing is missing. It's all there. The affectless gaze . . . The bored languor, the wasted pallor . . . The graying lips. The shaggy silver-white hair, soft and metallic . . . Nothing is missing. I'm everything my scrapbook says I am.(5)

Me-ism, I-ism, do-it-my-way-ism, death-ism; escape into the nothingness of "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, who's the most narcissistic of us all?" This is our context.

II. Our Response: Into the Hassle and the Hurt

"Am I covered? . . . Nothing is missing." What is missing is the emotion, the open rage, the ability to respond to the Culture of Narcissism out of a context of assurance rather than anxiety; what is missing is Life as it flows from one generation to the next affirming the giftedness of Life and seeking to enhance the future good by reaching past emotional detachment into the hassle and the hurt experienced by all God's Family of Humankind.

For that too is part of the context of our lives! We speak out of the context of God's becoming in our midst, out of the context of the people of God whose family

seeks to provide supportive structures and systems in which we develop. Mary Lynn saw something in the Beckers and the Quicks which gave significance and some degree of meaning to her anxious living. She saw within her nominations some qualities which reached beyond cultural narcissism.

For me that means that I will have to encourage my sisters and brothers in the faith in Jacksonville, Florida, to get into the hassle and into the hurt at new levels. While there are certainly exceptions, most of the people with whom I work, move, and have my being are not yet hurting at sustaining levels. They are not yet aware of the hassle which greets the lives of so many today. Most of "my people" are economically troubled only to the extent that they are trading in their gas-aholic cars for diesel-powered automobiles, bothered by the possibility that their maids may be able to come only on two days a week rather than four, etc.

My Mother's Day sermon needs to underscore the diversity of God's family, needs to suggest that many members of our larger family are hurting and need our help. Silvia Tennenbaum has a scene in her novel, Rachel, the Rabbi's Wife, which points in the right direction. Rachel is attending a "circle" meeting and the speaker says, "Jews must pay attention to the persecution of Jews. Forget about the others. Why should we care about them?" Rachel leans forward, her face burning with rage, her heart shouting:

"I tell why we should care," she said, not in a loud voice but in a voice choked with passion. "We should care because our tradition tells us to care. The most moving, most touching, most glorious thing about Jews has always been that we cared so desperately. We showed concern for victims of persecution everywhere, we wanted to do away with exploitation and injustice, and we never asked the question whether it was worth the death of one innocent to save the world. . . . We knew you had to fight for right and justice for everyone before you could truly have it for yourself. If there's one single reason to keep the Jews alive, it's for the compassion we feel for suffering. . . . But it is my contention that we must remember the Holocaust just as we remember our slavery in Egypt: not for the sake of revenge, but for the sake of compassion--what the Jews call rachmones. I hope and pray that we will never forget our role as 'compassionate ones'--that even though Hitler brought death to six million, he didn't bring death to our hearts and our spirit. . . ." (6)

Let us hope and pray that we never forget our role as "compassionate ones." And let us use this Mother's Day as an opportunity to help ourselves and our people begin to move beyond our narcissism and to identify with the hurt and the hassle which is part of the context of so many. That means being willing to struggle for justice within our communities, to find ways that people of little means will have some means to heat their homes and eat, to help people--ourselves included--have a sense of worth as we move into the strange new world of the 1980s; it means to care and to be compassionate because - - - Well, this is where reflections upon the pericope I am using begin to flood my context. I am reflecting upon I John 3:11-24 as part of the larger context of our lives within God's household. And I will be zeroing in on 3:11, attempting to fill the term "love" with the content of Christ's compassion. because - - - Well, certainly not because it is our nature to live for others or to be compassionately aware of and involved within their hurts. It is this word from one of our fathers in the faith which calls us out of our narcissism a bit:

For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. . . . And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

In spite of new teachings, beyond new emphases, transcending all understandings, the basic message of the Christian family is always, "Love one another as Jesus has commanded us to do." And the mark of love is obeying and going on to love even when the situation is confused and our love-objects are not all that deserving. That is exactly the way we have been loved in Christ! We have been loved, we are being loved, in our grouchiness, our fearfulness and in our anxiousness.

We love, however tentatively and carefully in our upper middle class narcissism, not because it is our nature to love, or nice to love, or easy to love, or convenient to love. It is none of that--ever! We love because Christ has loved us and we have believed in his love for us. We practice hardheaded loving, loving which leads to justice and to compassion, because we have been commanded to by Christ and what he has commanded is, simply put, good and right! In talking about his latest movie, Manhattan, Woody Allen says, "There's a speech I had to cut out of Manhattan and plan to get into the next film, where my character says that the metaphor for life is a concentration camp. I do believe that. The real question in life is how one copes in that crisis. I just hope I'm never tested, because I'm very pessimistic about how I would respond. I worry that I tend to moralize, as opposed to being moral."(7)

That is my fear as well. Or as the author of I John puts it, "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart to him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth!" Let us not moralize, but let us be moral. Does our international mission program receive support because we are silent in those nations where it is not safe to be moral? Do some of us increase our personal wealth by holding stock in companies which grow at the expense of the poor?

The former Roman Catholic priest, James Kavanaugh, has a poem which speaks to our fantastic opportunities to be loving in deed and in truth:

In the city
There are families to be found
Scattered lavishly around
In silent places
To replace the one that's lost
By death
Or distance
Or quarrels never healed
As happens.

There is a grandmother for those who need one,
Gray-haired and gentle
With cakes to bake
And love left over--never used.
There is a grandfather, for those who want one
Quiet and eccentric
With gifts to buy
And stories left over--never used.

In this city
There is blood-love
The kind that flows
When hearts expand.
There is cross-breeding
And genealogies are mended
Or improved.
There are families to be found(8).

Families to be found--never used, waiting, hoping, needing to become loved by us, waiting to enable us to become as they love in return. A way out of the culture of narcissism is to do what is at hand, to love where and how it is possible.

Someone asked the poet Robert Frost what was the first thing he did when getting out of bed in the morning. Expecting a profound answer, he was surprised when the poet replied, "I brush my teeth and I make my bed." That is it, of course. We love as we can in possible and practical manners. We do what is at hand in the household of God and family of all. Our time, I think as much as any time, needs the Christian Community, the intended family of Christ's people, God's very own Redneck Mothers, Good Ol' Boys and Girls who will believe that Jesus Christ loves us and who will love one another for his sake: people who will not talk about it, people who will not love in speech or in word alone, but in dedicated deeds and in truthful action. We need to be moral and dedicated in the sense Lasch speaks of as he closes his book:

The moral discipline formerly associated with the work ethic still retains a value independent of the role it once played in the defense of property rights. That discipline--indispensable to the task of building a new order--endures most of all in those who knew the old order only as a broken promise, yet who took the promise more seriously than those who merely took it for granted.(9)

I gave Jane a book last Easter. Written by Sharon McKern, the book is entitled Redneck Mothers, Good Ol' Boys and Girls, and Other Southern Belles. I shall be thinking about Mary Lynn, about The Culture of Narcissism, about my own sense of ending, this Mother's Day. But most of all, I shall be thinking about I John 3:11-24 and what Sharon McKern has to say as I encourage the people I serve to prepare a meal for a grouch, or to love someone into health and wholesomeness for Christ's sake. Just listen to Austin, Texas-based Sharon McKern:

When Robert Graves wrote that man does, while woman is, he hadn't gotten 'round to visiting Dixie. Leave it to the menfolk to sit around swapping tales of their latest coon hunts, shouting their arguments over hog-waller politics and enjoying their amiable discussions of lost crops, hard times, good whiskey, slow horses, and fast women. Leave it to others, too, to debate the finer ethical implications of solutions designed to alleviate such hardcore problems as unemployment, race discrimination, sexism, poverty, pollution, urban decay, and socialized medicine.

When it's time to go to the well, the provincial daughters of Dixie don't stop to hold a committee meeting.

They never put much stock in theoretical solutions. They never had much use for philosophical musings. They're far less romantic, for all their canopied beds and moonlit verandas, than Southern men. This may have to do with their long familiarity with age-old burdens like washing diapers, administering enemas, and laying out the dead.

Such chores don't inspire debate: they just need doing.(9)

They just need doing! Yes, "For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another . . ." And that needs doing!
The floor is open for nominations!

- (1) Lasch, Christopher, The Culture of Narcissism (New York: Warner, 1979), p. 17 (preface).
- (2) Ibid., p. 28.
- (3) Ibid., p. 22.
- (4) Irving, John, The World According to Garp (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), p. 274.
- (5) Lasch, op. cit., p. 170.
- (6) Tennenbaum, Silvia, Rachel, the Rabbi's Wife (New York: William Morrow), p. 385f.
- (7) Time magazine, April 30, 1979, p. 69.
- (8) Kavanaugh, James, Faces in the City (Los Angeles: Nash), "Families to be Found."
- (9) Lasch, op. cit., p. 397.
- (10) McKern, Sharon, Redneck Mothers, Good Ol' Boys and Girls, and Other Southern Belles (New York: Viking Press), p. 193.