

"MALE BONDING"

June 16, 2019

John 15:13-15

"Love one another the way I loved you." This is Jesus' message and we are well-familiar with it. But that it is so simple. Our relationships are complicated; none more so than with our fathers. Today we thank our fathers and father-figures for their gifts—and for their graces. Hear what the Spirit is saying to us in John's Gospel, the 15th Chapter, beginning at the 13th verse. Jesus is speaking to his disciples and friends. This is near the end of a two-chapter speech by him as his arrest draws near. The theme of love flowing from him, through us, and to others is found throughout:

"I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends. You are my friends when you do the things I command you. I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father.

When is the last time someone said to you these annoying and dismissive sentences: "That's just the way it is, Honey. You just have to accept it and move on." Chances are, you heard it when you were asking why you or someone you cared about was denied their hopes and dreams. Maybe it was when you were denied entrance into a vocation because your eye-sight wasn't clear enough to meet the standards.

Maybe it was when in high school you had your heart set on going to the prom with a certain someone and you found out that they had already had a date. Maybe it was that time when you were denied a job because of your gender. You wanted to be a police officer at a time when women were not allowed to be patrolmen; you were male and wanted to be a flight attendant, but at that time the only persons hired for that job were stewardesses.

You wanted to live your sexual identity authentically, but could not risk being rejected by your family or fired from your job, belittled and separated by your friends or excommunicated from your church, or worse than all of these things, condemned by the God you had been taught to fear and obey. It is Pride Month; I hope you feel loved and accepted here now, and everywhere soon.

Chances are at some time in your life, your father said to you something similar about accepting the way things are, as his father said it to him, and his father before him. I wonder what Don Shirley's father said to him when, as a small boy, he wanted to play and showed a

special talent for classical piano. As he matured, he learned that he had two things going against him in 1940s America: he was black, and he was gay.

Dr. Shirley, the grown-up concert pianist, was a very unhappy man, living all alone in his lavishly-appointed apartment atop Carnegie Hall in New York City in 1962. A brilliant composer and performer, he had a following of admirers, but he had no friends and his only acknowledged family, a brother, had not talked to him in years. Don had a drinking problem and an acceptance problem. As a black man in a white man's vocation, he felt like he neither belonged in white society or in the society of his race. It was 1962: to live openly as a gay man was neither safe nor good for his career as a concert musician, and so he was unhappily married and then just as unhappily divorced. He bemoaned his lack of acceptance in the cultures he straddled, yelling at his driver, "If I'm not black enough, and if I'm not white enough, and if I'm not *man* enough, then tell me, Tony, what *am* I?"

In 1962, Dr. Don Shirley, holding a degree in music and two honorary doctorates in psychology and liturgical arts, booked for himself and his trio a concert tour in the American deep South. Six years earlier in 1956, Nat King Cole had been attacked on stage in his home state of Alabama by KKK members who had been lying in wait for him. Before taken to the hospital he exclaimed, "I just came here to entertain you.

That was what I thought you wanted." Cole never performed in the South again.

Knowing the perils and prejudice he would face in the southern U.S. in the early 60s, Don Shirley set about to interview and hire a white driver to both transport and protect him. Many men were qualified to be his driver, but only one, a local small-time bouncer recently fired from Manhattan's Copacabana nightclub, down on his luck but full of false bravado, was qualified to go toe-to-toe with the high and mighty white plantation society of the segregated South.

Don and Tony "Lip" Vallelonga formed an unlikely relationship. Don had never tried fried chicken and Tony ate it by the Kentucky Fried buckets-full. Tony was offended that Don looked down on him for eating chicken off the bone. "How could a black guy not like fried chicken?" he demanded, and then insisted he learn how to eat—and adore it.

Tony couldn't write well, but he had promised to send letters faithfully to his wife, Dolores, while he was gone with Dr. Shirley. The highly educated man was quite put off by the language Tony used in his everyday life and in his crude command of written English. He learned to accept Tony's brash, unmannered style, but worked with him to refine it.

Tony stayed in fairly decent motels in the cities they toured, while Don had to consult "The Green Book," a paperback printed for the

Negro traveler in America that listed accommodations that would accept "colored" people. They were less than desirable. Tony could eat anywhere; Don was denied service even in the hotels in which he gave concerts in his tuxedo and tails.

Both men were expected to accept these rules of racial inequality. Their fathers and their fathers before them had lived by these rules, although in Tony's case, he had some experience with prejudice on account of the fact that he was Italian and from the Bronx. The South, though, was for each of them an experience of racial injustice altogether different than anything they ever had encountered in New York City. Our film today following worship is "*Green Book*."

Jesus lived and worked and mediated his own culture of racial and religious separation. He was belittled for being from Nazareth. The cultured of Jewish society remarked behind his back, "Nothing good ever comes from Nazareth!" He was a poor Jew from a humble family. Unfortunately, we know very little about his parents. From what we have been led to understand, though, his father was much older than his mother. He came from neither money nor status. His father disappears from the Gospel scriptures early on and we are led to believe that he died, but his fate is not clear.

I wonder if Joseph ever sat young Jesus down and explained the facts of his paltry existence to him, saying, "That's just the way it is, Honey. You just have to accept it and move on."

We do not know if adult Jesus owned a home, had a wife and children, or had any sustained employment; we think not. Maybe he was a carpenter; maybe his father was, too. It is hard in the Jesus story to know what is probably true and what is probably just a story.

We know he was not accepted by the Pharisees, the entitled men of his day and culture. Even when Jesus showed a profound knowledge and understanding of the scriptures, he was not accepted by them. Judged and dismissed, cast off, chased about and threatened, we know that he was eventually silenced. And we do know that if Joseph ever had that talk with Jesus The Younger, as young sons are wont to do, Jesus did *not* accept the "just accept it" speech. Jesus was a great agent of change in his culture; he did not accept the status quo, especially when it was unjust to those without cultural power. He was vocal, he was radical, he was fearless, and he was undaunted. Still, we don't know if his father admired him for these qualities or if he wished he'd just, "Pipe down! live quietly, son, and be resigned to the way things are."

Acceptance of "the way things are" is the sin of our fathers. It can be the sin of our mothers, too, but this is Father's Day, so for you

equal opportunity folks, you will have to wait for next May for the sermon about the shortcomings of our mothers!

The sins of our bloodlines are themes that transcend the centuries and the settings. They were as true in Jesus' time and place as they were for our immediate ancestors and as they will be for our sons and daughters in decades to come.

President Lyndon Johnson declared it in America by proclamation in 1966, and President Richard Nixon made Father's Day a permanent national holiday in 1972. See? And you thought Richard Nixon never did anything "fatherly" for our country! Big Brother Hallmark Cards Company created the first Father's Day greeting card 50 years earlier in 1920. It showed a dapper-dressed white fellow with a wide smile, twinkling eyes, and flowing reddish blond hair extending a hand through an imaginary circle window to his father. It says, "Put 'er there Dad, you're an ace."

Either in the father that birthed us or in the father-figure who raised us or still raises us, this morning we say, "thank you." Today also, fathers and father-figures of all types long to hear those words from their children. "Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for encouraging me to be the best version of myself I could be, thank you for walking me to the altar when I married my Beloved, thank you for understanding me and accepting me when I told you I would not be

giving you grandchildren, and thank you for telling me on your death bed how much I was loved by you."

"Thank you also for your sins and your shortcomings." All across this great land today, we might hear these pronouncements: "Dad, I forgive your acceptance of the sin of racism when my African American friends were not allowed in our house. I forgive your harsh and judgmental anger when we had our bitter arguments about the morality of the Vietnam War, who I chose to love and how I dressed and wore my hair, and about my career dreams as opposed to your plans for me and the family business. I forgive you for smoking cigarettes around me and not knowing they were addictive and harmful. I forgive you your language, that you called people who were not like us names, that you told me never to trust a Jew or a Nigger or a Chink or a Catholic. I forgive you for divorcing Mom, for moving out of our house and leaving us, and for telling me, "'That's just the way it is, Honey. You just have to accept it and move on.'" I forgive you and I accept your humanity. As Tony Lip says when he discovers a shocking fact about Dr. Shirley, "Don't worry about it, Doc. I've been working nightclubs my whole life. I know it's a...*complicated* world."

I had Bill read you this scripture passage today so that we could be reminded of the softer side, the friend-ly side of Jesus our Christ. Maybe Jesus learned some of the qualities of adulthood from

his male friends, his disciples. I like to think Jesus learned equally valuable qualities of adulthood from the women with whom he was connected.

We need our friends. We need our fathers and father-figures every bit as much as we need our mothers and mother-figures. Whether we had wonderful fathers or distant ones, whether we had children or grandchildren or we are surrogate parents to the children of other fathers that we know, Jesus reminds us that our joy and strength is found in our commitments to others, be they friends, family, or unlikely brothers or sisters. A gay black man plays Cho-pan for his friend, Tony Lip, who doesn't understand how it is crafted, but who appreciates it in his own way. An Italian strong-arm tough guy butchers the Queen's English as he stands up for his friend and employer against racist police officers in the South.

I rather like a short exposition I found on grace and acceptance written by theologian Paul Tillich in 1948. It seems appropriate for Father's Day and all the layers of emotion that attend our closest familial relationships. He writes,

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us.

It strikes us when year after year the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"

May it Be So.