

“A Warning, A Second Warning, and A Gift”
Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56
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There is warning here to people who believe they can be Christian by themselves, outside of a religious community, the church. There is also warning here to those who love the church too much. And finally there is gift and promise here who despair over unfulfilled promises.

I think we can agree that an aspect of growing up, becoming ‘mature,’ is to come to a certain understanding and relationship with one’s parents. When I was fifteen I was pretty sure that getting my driver’s license meant freedom from my parents. Now I could demonstrate how independent I was from them by driving myself, coming home when I wanted to. From now on they would be optional in my life.

Then when I was eighteen and moved out of my parents’ house I was pretty sure now that I was grown up. After all I was just doing that American thing: You demonstrate how you don’t need your parents anymore by putting some physical distance between yourself and them. Not only would they be optional, but they would be at some distance from me. Through many of these years I was something of an expert at finding and naming their flaws. Interesting conversations we had in those years.

But in those awkward summers when I would come home from school, I could tell I had more work to do. Those three months of summer were filled with negotiations and arguments. Was I grown up because I could yell at my parents and demand my way and sometimes even get it? Was that grown up because I could identify all of their shortcomings and flaws?

It wasn’t. When I got married and moved to Boston for graduate school, and even had a daughter, surely *that* meant I was all grown up. Separated from my parents by a couple thousand miles, I found that I now strangely missed them.

It’s easy to be a self at a distance. But “being a self at a distance” from one’s parents really isn’t growing up. Though it is quite American to do it that way, it remains a kind of fake growing up. It took several decades and a lot of emotional work to be myself while still in close contact with my parents. I finally came to realize that I was only grown up when I could be with them and resist that feeling of being a nine year old child *while I was with them*. You can’t be grown up because you have put some distance with your parents. You can only be grown up while in emotional contact with parents, when you come to see them as real people that you love and need, even with all of their famous flaws. And that is true whether they are alive or dead.

I have come to believe that one's relationship with the church works something like that as well. There is warning here for those who believe they can be Christian alone, without contact with a Christian community, the church. The writer Anne Rice posted recently on Facebook:

Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being "Christian" or being a part of Christianity It's simply impossible for me to "belong" to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group.¹

Anne Rice's split from the church is hardly the heroic stance it may look to be at first blush. It is the majority view, and she got a lot of support and congratulations for her decision.

I can understand her disappointment with the church. At times you and I have all felt frustrated and ready to put on that t-shirt that says, "Lord, save me from your followers." You contemplate going it alone. You can then come up with your own version of Christianity by yourself. It will be a cordial faith conforming better with your moral positions and ideology.² More than that it may even be a seamless extension of self. No more refining fire from God. No more pounding of the hammer God that smashes rocks. No more prophetic words that will be in conflict with yourself. No more divisions caused by your faith. Go it alone and your designed God will complement your self and all of its prior commitments perfectly.

At this point the writer of Hebrews makes a kind of "Who do you think you are?" appeal. Consider the costly faithfulness of those who have gone before you, giving up so much but not giving up on the promises. The fulfillment of those promises has been held back so that you and I wouldn't be born too late. The unspoken implication, of course, is that something of the same may be required from you and me. The "cloud of witnesses" is not just on your behalf. Soon we will be, for the sake of those who follow us, members of that same cloud. Your and my faith is not just a matter of our dear present conscience. It is a matter for those who follow us.

You and I have not made progress by leaving the church any more than I made progress when I moved out of my parents' house. In some strange way it that separation from church demonstrates a kind of fusion with it. Kids don't argue with their parents because they are really grown up and their parents aren't important to them anymore. Kids pick fights with their parents because their parents are, if anything, *too* important to them. I am increasingly suspicious that the same is true of our relationship with the church.

¹ Anne Rice, posting July 28, 2010, www.facebook.com

² "In the reading from Luke we confront stark and conflictual sayings of Jesus that sit poorly with contemporary images of God. Our culture seems to prize a God with an infinite capacity for empathy, a God who is "nice." (Bumper stickers tell you that "Jesus loves you" even if everyone else thinks you're an ogre or worse.) Luke challenges this thinking. He offers a glimpse of redemption for a world that is anything but nice, and that needs much more than a nice God to redeem it." Teresa Berger, "Disturbing the Peace: Luke 12:49-56," *The Christian Century*, August 10, 2004, p.18

You can be some sort of self-invented spiritual something or other alone, but true maturing in the faith is done in contact with a church whose flaws you are very familiar with. True maturing in the faith is something that happens over decades of Christian friendship, worship, learning, and service, in contact with the church whose shortcomings you and I have become experts at pointing out.

There is also warning here for those for whom the church is valued too much. The church does have flaws, sometimes famously so. These people with whom you receive the gospel and the sacraments are just like you: sometimes hypocritical, sometimes betraying the faith they were baptized into, at times an embarrassment to the body of Christ. Sometimes churches are built on the dreams of prophets rather than the Word of God, as Jeremiah so harshly points out. As I commented at the pastors' Bible study I was involved in last week, "Looks like we picked the wrong week to be religious professionals." There is plenty of both Old and New Testament testimony that God is not impressed with our precious rituals and ceremonies. The church belongs to Christ and not to liturgical reforms, religious professionals, members or friends. The church is what God uses to create and nourish faith, and at the same time it is unrelentingly human, cluttered up with all kinds of silliness. But it's the only community within which God has promised his gifts and grace.

I announced to my pastor when I was about twenty-two years old that I had decided to give the church a try again, to come back and see what I could make of it. He totally surprised me when he replied, "Not so fast. Remember that there is all sorts of silliness in the church, such as it is made up of folks like us." He encouraged me to expect such silliness. I came back to the church with some caution.

I have never been able to be much of a Christian without the church. And at the same time I have never ceased to be amazed at the capacity of the church for absurd behavior. It's a "can't live with it and can't live without it" sort of dilemma. You can be *your* ideal Christian outside of the church, but the real test is if you can be a Christian while in relationship with the church. I am surprised at this point in my life I have come in spite of everything to love the church dearly. Somehow God has used this flawed institution, jam packed with weak hypocrites just like me -- not nearly as organized as you would think -- to create and nourish my faith. My relationship with the church has described the same sort of arc that my relationship with my parents has.

A warning, another warning, and finally, there are gifts here for us who hold to these promises. Jesus may be right: we aren't good at interpreting "the present time." But it appears that in spite of such spectacular hypocrisy by us that Jesus is "under stress" to be baptized through the ordeal for which he has been sent, his cross. In the end this is an act which quite excludes us, a going forth of a single minded Jesus in spite of all of our silliness and absurdity. For the sake of the "joy" that was set before him, "disregarding its shame," and we might add disregarding our bumbling faithfulness, Jesus strides to his cross. For in the end God's success with God's creation, including us, proceeds with or without the church, with or without the success of you and me. Considering our ambivalent sense of the church, this promise by Jesus may strike us as an unexpected gift. And unexpected gifts are what the gospel is all about. Amen.

