

## "Growing Up With Grace"

My grandson Wyatt is now three years old and the class clown in his preschool. He's growing up and feeling braver about getting out there on his own. So one day after preschool, he decided to play the class clown with his mother in the parking lot while they were getting into the car. Instead of sticking close to his mother, he let go of her hand, and ran off into the traffic. When his mother screamed for him to stop and to come back he just laughed and kept on going. Fortunately, nothing happened to him. But that night, because Mom was still feeling the terror in the pit of her stomach she told a "little-boy" story to scare the **hojoppers** out of him. Once upon a time there was a little boy and he lived in a big house with his mom, his dad, his sister, and his two doggies, a brown one and a white one. The little boy loved to make people laugh. He would do anything to make people crack up. And one day the little boy thought of something that he thought would be very funny. One day when he was walking out side with his momma, the little boy let go of her hand and ran away as fast as he could. He heard his mommy calling him "little boy! Little boy! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop! But he didn't stop. He laughed and he laughed and he ran as fast as he could. But all of a sudden the little boy couldn't hear his momma anymore. He stopped and looked around, but his momma was gone. He said, "Momma", Mom?" but she didn't answer. He couldn't see her anywhere. The little boy began to feel afraid. His momma was gone and he was all alone. Soon it started to get dark outside. The little boy wished he had never run away from his momma because now he was all alone and it was getting dark and cold. Then he heard something in the bushes. It was a noisy monster! The monster sounded like this *awk, awk, awk* (insert scary peacock noise)! The little boy cried and cried because he had run away from his momma. He wished he had held tight to her hand like he was supposed to. He wanted to go home more than anything in the whole world. But he didn't listen, and it was too late. Isn't that sad?

The story worked. Why? From the moment of our conception, to the day of our birth, and during the first years of our life . . . we are totally dependent upon our parents. We need our parents to survive, to thrive, and to grow. Because of our dependent state, as infants we naturally fear separation from our parents, we get angry when they abandon us, and we become anxious

when left alone. The bottom line for us is that when we are young we listen to our parents, do what they say, and try to please them in every way . . . so that they won't stop loving us.

The benefit of this primal relationship of dependency is threefold. First, it creates object constancy in our mind's eye. It moves the real external relationship of trust and love into our child internal psyche so that we don't feel alone and afraid when our parent is absent. Second, it gives us a secured sense of belonging that enables our sense of self to start developing. Third, it flames the desire within us to become just like our parents. This is why the "little boy" story worked with Wyatt. It was age appropriate and met his growing up needs.

The downside to this first relationship of pleasing dependency, absolute trust, and loving care is that when it is time for us to individuate, to grow into our unique sense of self, and to leave the nest . . . those early dynamic impressions of loss, anxiety, and fear percolate up and confound us. If I am not like my parents---if I stray from their teachings---- Will I die? Will I become lost and never found? Will I never be able to find my way home?

When I was growing up in these confusing years there was a different 'little girl' story that worked with me. It was the story that the church told about Jesus and his baptism. In that story, after Jesus left home and before he started work, he chose to be baptized. Many things are important about this event, but the most important one for me is what occurred after his baptism. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." God made it known to Jesus that he had a Heavenly Parent in addition to his earthly ones. In his baptism, Jesus was named and claimed as a beloved child of God. It was a second birth for Jesus in which his Heavenly Parent established a secured bond of love and trust. It was the grace needed for Jesus to individuate from his family of origin and to be reborn in the image and likeness of God. It was the grace he needed to do his father's work of bringing the kingdom of God from heaven into earth. When I first heard this story, I remember wondering if this grace of being redeemed as a child of God might just be what I needed to help me in my

Isaiah 43:1-7.

growing-up problems with sadness, fear, and anxiety. As I reflect on Kate Huey's commentary on today's scripture readings, I see that I was right. *The voice from heaven says, "You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." These words may come from heaven but they do not come out of the blue; they echo God's words from Isaiah long before: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine . . . you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" (43:1b, 4a). God remembers us, Isaiah says; in fact, God reassures us., "I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands" (49:16). God's love didn't start yesterday, or even in the New Testament, it is from of old, and it is focused on each one of us, by name. We belong to God and God loves us. It's as if God is trying to say to each one of us, "No matter what happens and no matter how low and discouraged you feel, no matter what is happening around you and in your life, don't you ever let anyone tell you that you are anything but a precious and beloved child of God"* (Sermon Seeds, Jan. 3, 2010).

Pastor Robinson tells a redemptive story of growing-up grace that happened twenty years ago when the Berlin Wall came down. *A 13 year old girl from the eastern side somehow made her way to a Christian community in West Berlin and found shelter there. Several years before, this child had been sold into prostitution by her mother. One day in that Christian community there was a baptism. The pastor poured water into the font and as he did so he spoke of being "born again from above." Sitting near the back, the 13 year old girl listened to his words. After the service, she went to the pastor who stood near the font. Shy, she asked, "Can I be born again?" For her, the words were not a formula or a slogan. They were not code words. They were truth and life. The answer was, "Yes."* (UCC Daily Devotional Jan. 3, 2009).

Martin Luther wrote: *"A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued."* Baptismal grace is our daily remembrance of who we are, and whose we are, and how we are beloved children of God. It is the grace that saves us from our growing-up pains that are associated with our sadness over irretrievable loss, our fear based shame, and our guilt fueled anxiety. God said: *"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."* This grace is our hope of being found, our assurance of forgiveness, and our joy of coming home. Amen.

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you, I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south,, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth---everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."