

FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to the Channing Memorial Church on May 8, 2011

We all grew up in families, and they weren't perfect. Still we become more the people we are capable of being because of the flawed families that loved and protected us while we learned. Difficult though they may sometimes have been we owe a great deal to those who raised us as well as to our wives, husbands and partners who raise us still.

Remember the last time you saw a young child try to take her first step. Her arms are out to her sides so that she can either catch herself or be caught. Her eyes are fearful and expectant. She wants us to be proud of her, but she doesn't want to get hurt. She wants the independence, but she also wants to be held. She knows that every first step is a shaky willingness to fall forward in the hope that she can recover her balance and stand on her own two feet.

Learning to walk means just fall forward and catch yourself: then fall forward and catch yourself again. It is not as simple as it seems. Neither is growing up. In order to master this equation we need the support of families of all kinds – support given over and over and even until the end of our lives when on that final fall forward we are caught and held in love forever. Growing up requires a faith that growing up is possible.

Where that falling forward will take us from the first step to the end of our lives can be absolutely amazing. This spring I found myself thinking about our daughter who is now a teacher as well as a wife and mother of three young girls. I remembered the year she joined the girls' softball team. She was in middle school, and she had never before shown an interest in any sport, let alone one involving hard round balls and wooden bats. So her decision to go out for softball did greatly surprise us.

To prepare her for tryouts her brother volunteered to play catch with her. The first time he lobbed the ball softly in her direction, she put up her glove more to deflect the ball than to catch it, and the ball sailed by her glove, bouncing lightly off her forehead. That ended practice for the day, and we feared for all time.

Softball wasn't really Karen's sport but she played bravely on for three years. She held her own. Her first coach was a saint, who deserves to be treated like royalty by God and all of the other saints when his time comes. Under his coaching she even improved. She went on to play Field Hockey, where she did quite well. And then – God help us – she took up Rugby in college. You

want to know what Rugby looks like to a parent. Thousands of dollars of orthodontia constantly at risk.

Then came white water canoeing, and rock climbing and back packing and we, also, have a picture from a NOLS expedition in which she is hanging over a glacier. Now she is providing a warm and safe home for three little girls in their growing up. It all started with a first step, but in some ways we know it had to get restarted many other times including that day when a ball missed her glove and hit her forehead, ending softball practice for that moment but offering the challenge of overcoming disappointment for the rest of her life. And we know that she, like all of us, will spend the rest of her life falling forward and catching herself in order to take the next step.

Life is full of restarts. When we are young we work hard to develop a notion of who we are, whom we can trust and what is important. Our first notions get shattered in adolescence. They get rebuilt as we near our Twenties and then shaken up again when we begin to reconstruct what it might be like to live intimately with another person. Over and over it becomes necessary to fall forward and balance. Our life keeps moving on, but periodically we return to taking the next first step all over again.

We have to learn some hard lessons. Life asks us questions and we will want to answer them differently at different ages. The infant asks, "Who can I trust?" Two year olds ask, "How free can I be" but two years later at four they wonder, "How much freedom do I want?"

For latency age children the question may be "How much can I learn," but soon it becomes "Who am I really?" Young adults wonder, "Who am I that yearns to be in a caring relationship with other people," but later they will ask "How am I going to get on with my work in the world," and finally we all wonder, "What has my life meant?"

As we grow older we lose and replace our old selves several times. Adolescence is the death of childhood innocence, which is why teenagers sometimes seem to go into mourning. But adolescence also brings the birth of a new personality, which will eventually become an independent adult. Mid-life marks the death of some hopes and dreams – as well as the loss of some idealism – but it is the birth both of more realistic expectations and of a tougher love for those who come into our lives intimately.

We fall forward and balance. As we grow older balancing also involves giving up some assumptions. There are some beliefs parents want their children to have even though they know their children will eventually discover that the truth will be different from what they were told. It is a delicate balance to fill children with hope for life as it could be but also help them to adjust themselves to life as it is.

For example, when our children wake up frightened in the middle of the night, we come in, hold them and tell them that there is nothing to worry about. Nothing can harm them. It is important that they believe what we say in that moment, but later they will discover that what we said wasn't entirely true. It can be a very dangerous world, and they must learn how to protect themselves.

We want them to believe that virtue and hard work will always be rewarded but that isn't always true. Honesty and hard work may be the way we choose to live, and our rewards for living that way may be intrinsic, but in the real world there is often not much connection between merit and rewards. When children are young we also tell them they can do anything in the world they want to do, however we all actually do have our limitations.

As we grow older we also learn that doing the right thing isn't as easy or as obvious as we once thought it would be. We do not always grasp the right thing to do, because if we did grasp it, we might realize that we really do not want to do it. Growing older means discovering how we create illusions to protect ourselves from having to undergo the discomfort of being as true to our own principles as we think we want to be.

What a complex and difficult road it is for each of us to become a mature human being! The road never really ends. There are successes and failures, risks, trials and disappointments. There are compromises and tradeoffs. Sometimes life hits us so hard it's a wonder we get up again. There are treks through the valley of the shadow, which make us wonder if we will ever emerge.

Few of us can say that we made that journey unaided. For all of us to some extent our families provided the strength, the courage, the love and the direction that at least got us started. We could also say that the job of the family is not just to be there for baby's first step, but to have nurtured in us the capacity to find the faith and strength to take all of those other new steps whenever they become necessary. That's a tall order. Some families are more up to it than others. But what I want to hold up this morning is what a miracle it is that families work at all.

Consider these eternal truths about families with children in them. 1. Every family is weird: each in its own way. 2. All parents sometimes lose their tempers. 3. Most siblings fight sometimes. 4. Most parents behave in ways that sometimes embarrass their children. In fact we told our children that God put us on earth for that specific purpose. 5. And children sometimes embarrass their parents as well.

Families are a little bit miraculous. Think about how difficult it is for independent people to live under the same roof. Those who are temperamentally inclined to chatter in the morning have to accommodate to the more sensible

members of their family who understand that silence is the proper mood for breakfast. Those who like to see everything in its proper place may have to make some kind of peace with those family members who have a more – shall we call it -- intuitive idea of neatness.

What is a family? A family is two or three or more people who think differently, react differently, express anger and sadness differently, dress differently, sleep differently, dream differently, play differently and enjoy different kinds of entertainment, frequently at different decibel levels. It is a wonder that families work out at all, and sometimes they don't. We know that. But most families – products though they are of love and anger, hope and worry, of good intentions and the mistakes to which good intentions sometimes can lead – do manage to raise us to find our way in this world.

Because any family generates conflict, it can be a place where we learn that one of the choices before us is whether to lead a forgiving life or a resentful life. It is also a place where people relearn over and over that the only constant in life is adapting to change and surprise graciously.

My family hadn't expected their oldest son to become a minister. The other son became a banker, and they did expect that because he had been lending them pocket change at usurious rates of interest since he was eight. But then came a daughter in law and grandchildren, then married grandchildren and great grandchildren. And some deaths too. Our relationships change and expand.

Eventually children are called upon to do for their parents what their parents have done for them. The only constant in life is adapting to change and surprise graciously – or at least as graciously as possible.

Living in families requires surviving the experience of rivalry. In families, as in life, there is never enough of the pie to go around to everyone's complete satisfaction. So, we learn to choose our battles, adjust our expectations and settle for the best we can get. We learn for the first time that all needs cannot be met. All living, all wanting, all needing is negotiating. Understanding this, we become more humane and more civilized, and the family becomes the true seedbed of democracy.

Living in families means that it is always necessary to learn how to forgive. To forgive imperfection in our parents. To forgive imperfection in our children. To forgive ourselves for plans and dreams that failed to happen. To forgive and forget failures we think shouldn't have happened. To forgive moments of anger, carelessness or inattention.

Living in families means learning to cope with those moments when everyone around us just seems dull and pedestrian and boring to live with. It

means learning that the world seems full of exotic and mysteriously exciting people only to those who do not have to live with those mysteriously exciting people. Living in families is the way in which we discover that the greatest gifts in life are the very ordinary gifts of honesty, faithfulness and caring.

From our first falling forward at birth to our first step and through every subsequent step we make at crafting a personality, a vocation, a faith in life and in others we are sustained to some extent by the wholly improbable – yet nearly miraculous success – of the family constellation that nurtured us along the way.

Sure, I know many people who feel they did not get enough from their families, but perhaps we ought to consider the limitations each of us brings to living with and nurturing someone else and then figure out that whatever strength our families did give us was no small gift.

It is inescapably true that human beings finally become mature human beings only out of the messy give and take of family life; testing the limits and making mistakes; trying on different personalities before finding one that fits for awhile; wondering why their family members have become an embarrassment to them and then, after reappraisal, realizing how much love was always there for them however imperfectly it was expressed.

God does not move us forward in one grand perfectly orderly sweep. Life is messy. Whatever leads us forward experiments. It tries, and if it fails it tries again. That is true for families and for all of our relationships. There is no other way for anyone to grow up.