

# In My Father's House

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The story goes that when I was five years old, with brothers ages 7 and 9, my father turned one day to my mother and said, "I need to become a minister." Imagine her surprise! And so, from then on I was raised in my Father's house.

The title of my talk today belongs to both my earthly father, a Methodist minister, and to the lifetime I've lived in the church (my heavenly Father's House). There have been many earthly houses: we moved around several times in my youth, always to little towns in the Pacific Northwest; several parsonages, many small churches.

My first solid memory of my participation in a church was when I was 5 or so and was a flower girl for the first time. Not entirely clear of what I was supposed to do, apparently, I dutifully dropped lovely petals from my basket while I walked from the back of the church to the front, and then turned around and walked back down the aisle picking up each petal I had just dropped. I couldn't just leave them, could I?

I've visited many other of my heavenly Father's houses: churches and cathedrals across the country and across the globe. Houses of different faiths, different religions, and different architecture. It is a complete sensory experience for me: the ornateness or simplicity of each, the smell of the candles when they are extinguished, the quiet of the sanctuary, and the feeling of the presence of God. Each time I am in awe of what these religious houses represent.

I have a special and private church that I visit often. In fact, if you will indulge me, I can take you there. Close your eyes for a moment and follow me. Picture a lovely grove of trees, with a slight breeze blowing through the treetops. There is a path under my feet, soft and silent. As I walk down the path, I can feel the breeze and I reach out and touch a tree, feel its bark, just so I know it's real.

In a small clearing I see a tiny stone building. It is my chapel in the woods. I reach the door, arched, wooden, and I knock. Although I've visited here many times, I always knock and always the door is opened.

Inside, I slip off my shoes to feel the cool stone floor under my feet. There are always others here, I'm not alone, although I do not know them. I walk toward the front of the church and slide into a pew and bow my head for a moment. When I look up there is a beautiful shaft of light coming from the windows shining onto the altar. I know instinctively that it is a spiritual presence. Spirit. And I am home, in my Father's house.

If you've had your eyes closed, you can open them now. Take a deep breath. It is here, there, in my Father's house that I experience pure love, peace, solace, and joy.

Still. The connections I feel to Spirit, in a church or chapel, cathedral, or synagogue, while deeply felt, really, should not be the only representation of my faith. On that idea I'm still working. I do know that it is not enough to find God only in houses of worship, as I have done my whole life.

When I was young in the churches my father served, I learned about God and Jesus, listened to the familiar parables, and the scripture...sometimes I even listened to my father's sermons. The spiritual education I got was from confirmation classes, Sunday services, Sunday school, and around the dinner table.

I knew my father was a questioning minister. I knew that he struggled sometimes, although to the degree and in what areas, I do not know. But I didn't struggle with my faith; mostly I just didn't think about it very much or question it really, at all.

While reading Brian McLaren's book, *Faith after Doubt*, I thought: Wow. I've never doubted my faith. He writes of many souls, including himself, who have strong beliefs and faith, and then something, some experience, shakes that very foundation. That really worried me. What sort of person am I that my childhood beliefs are sufficient? How can I be any sort of thinking Christian when I don't think?

That is, until now. Things have changed for me. Now I'm struggling and questioning. I guess better late than never, right?

As Mike and I were taking the membership classes with Steve to join this church, I remember thinking, "this man, this church, is going to change my life." And how. When he asked us in the membership class to write a statement of faith, I was speechless. A what? How was I supposed to know that? Well, let's see: I believe...

And that's when it hit me: I had no clear notion of my faith, what faith even meant, or how to go about finding that out. And of course, I resisted. When I participated in the most recent book discussion, Richard Rohr's *The Naked Now*, there was a passage about the ego and faith. Rohr wrote that too often our egos prevent us from really discovering and experiencing our faith. True to form, my ego said, "well, maybe I don't even want to do this. Maybe I don't need to have the God experience. Because if I did, then I will just be asked to do something uncomfortable, outside of my depth." And then...Steve called and asked if I would speak today. See how that works? My ego was right, I would be asked to do something that was uncomfortable.

My ego pipes up often and more and more I realize that's why I hesitate. This message today is a good example. My ego says, "you'll be vulnerable, showing something to people that is entirely too personal." Yep. And yet, here I am.

It has become very clear to me now that I am still very immature in my understanding of faith, especially my own. But, I feel that I have experienced God in many ways, and have felt often that She was RIGHT THERE, waiting for me to recognize Her presence. I just haven't...very often...yet.

My father's sermons were usually biblically based in that he preached from and about the scripture passage read in the service. Many years ago he preached a sermon titled, *The Hound of Heaven*. I'd like to read some of that to you this morning. I'm quoting his words:

"One of the theological themes I was introduced to in seminary that has stayed with me through the years is the claim that humankind does not and cannot of our own merit or power, go to, seek or find God. No matter what the conveyance, the method or the tools or how long or sincere the desire, ultimately it is God who seeks and finds. It is God who, through all the

scriptures, relentlessly pursues humankind. Truthfully, we can only prepare for God's coming, be open to God's appearing, receive God's arrival, and respond to God's presence.

Again and again we are counseled in scripture that God loves, God is love and that he loves the world so much that he gave his son for the life of it. It comes to us again and again that it is God who takes the initiative in the care and nurture of his creation, especially those of God's own image.

There is unconditional love and a relentless and eternal pursuit that dogs our souls and we are drawn to God by the persistent and faithful caring, not by our own merit or power. It is this relentless love, the relentless God who pursues us as a hound from heaven, never giving up on us until we are in His eternal care, under His wings, in His shelter.

It may be hard to understand the kind of relentless love God pursues us with —harder still to comprehend the kind of concern Paul speaks of when he writes to Timothy: that in spite of what Paul was, who we are, God still judged him faithful by appointing him to service: saving sinners, showing mercy, and most important using the life and talents of those who appear to be the least, to gain the most."

Oh, boy. This really spoke to me and was eerily similar to the ideas in Rohr's *The Naked Now*. Of course, I have no recollection of hearing this sermon at the time, but it struck me when I was looking through the boxes of my dad's sermons that I have. I love this image of the Hound of Heaven. Because it puts into words my feeling that God IS RIGHT THERE, just waiting for me to turn towards Her, to be used for God's purposes. I also feel that God may well use me as Paul writes: the one who appears to be the least (in faith anyway), to gain the most.

Again, in his book, *Faith after Doubt*, Brian McLaren encourages us to ask questions about our beliefs:

"Are you a believer who puts your distinct beliefs first, or are you a person of faith who puts love first? Are you a believer whose beliefs put you in competition and conflict with people of differing beliefs or are you a person of faith whose faith moves you toward the other with love?"

I think I am a person of faith, as he describes it, or at least I want to be. And I think that I'm in good company in this house. I feel so fortunate to have a community of folks who can and will support me in my searching. I'm clearly still growing and exploring and discovering. It will require me to step out into the everyday. Examine my faith. Question what it is that I have been taught in my father's house. It will be a lifelong journey, I suppose, and I've really just started.

Richard Rohr and my father both believe that I am, we all are, pursued by God, and all we have to do is be open to God's presence, be aware of God around us, experience God in the here and now, take joy in this time and place. We don't have to wait for heaven; God's presence is all around us. That is faith.

And so, I am reminded that I do have a foundation upon which to build my faith because I was raised, and continue to dwell, in my Father's House.

Prayer written by Ray L. Whitlow (my dad)

Gracious and loving God, grant to us your presence today as we gather here with prayers of thanks and with hearts filled with joy for all the blessings we receive.

Forgive us our erring ways. Forgive us if we have turned away from you seeking our own desires. Hear our humble intercessions for those who need your strength and spirit but have lost the way for some reason. Turn to their needs and let them know they are not alone in their troubles.

[INSERT PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE HERE...we pray for \_\_\_\_\_]

Guide this church in its ministry; guide our country and our world toward the higher causes of human dignity; help all leaders of nations make right decisions concerning the welfare of humanity and the globe; give wisdom and insight to all who are in power positions with the responsibility of providing and caring for populations; strengthen the faithful laborers who work for peace and justice; give assurance to live in a world of doubt about the future, about the conditions of the world.

Let this day be a day of glad opportunities of warm fellowship of joyful recreation and restoration of spirit. Open the way for us to come to you with every thought and dream, every joy and sorrow.

Fill us with your divine spirit this day and always, turning to Jesus who taught us to pray:

Our mother and father in heaven....