

WILL YOU BE A REFUGE?

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It has NOT been a relaxing week in Lake Wobegon. I attended a funeral in South Dakota on Monday, returned home to work plus the final push of getting our house up for sale which finally happened Friday, showings yesterday and today, picked up a cold along the way, and now I get to relax into my attempt at a sermon. If nothing else, the week may have given me a taste of what it's like to be a pastor . . . if so, I don't think we pay him enough!

I was asked to do something that might speak to the pledge drive season we'll be moving into soon. But relax. I didn't have the time to create a well-researched, annotated, academic presentation.

At most, this will be pledge "light." Today, you'll get more story than facts and numbers and dollars.

Not long ago, a friend's father-in-law suffered a catastrophic and fatal stroke. Family strife kicked in even before he died. As they were gathered at his hospital bed, they recalled another recently departed relative whose home had been robbed just after his death. So they decided to immediately gather at the father's home to retrieve and secure the large amount of cash and valuable guns he kept there. There was a lot of distrust – one brother wasn't allowed to search alone because of his history of taking, and then frittering away funds; others searched for the notebooks in which the father had recorded the many loans made to relatives; grandkids were ordered to leave their grandfather's home where they'd lived and cared for him for the past decade, the distrusted brother screamed at his siblings, and when several hundreds of thousands of dollars of cash was discovered, and yes, it really was under the proverbial mattress, the Philadelphia mint had to get involved to process it.

I remember saying to more than one acquaintance at the time that it reminded me once again to be thankful for my own family.

Now, my family isn't made up of a host of saints either, and money doesn't usually bring out the best in us. My mother often bemoaned the fact that my dad wasn't on the "inside" of his own siblings' financial shenanigans: the inner circle belonged to his youngest brother, and one sister, my Aunt Carrie. And my dad could have caused a good bit of strife between the four of us kids, when my brother inherited more than my two sisters and me combined. But we chose unity and maintenance of the family farm over strife. That didn't mean it didn't hurt tho, that while were we confident he loved us all, my dad seemed to value his only son more than his three daughters.

I didn't fully recognize it growing up, but Dad's family was definitely unique. He had a half-brother and half-sister, plus eight full siblings. That alone wasn't unusual for farm families in the 1920s. Their level of lifelong togetherness was, however, something I suspect arose from their eye-sight, or rather, the lack there-of. My grandmother went blind from glaucoma in the midst of the Depression, when she was in her mid-forties. By then, one of my dad's brothers and one sister were already blind from retinal detachments; another brother gradually lost his sight. One sister suffered from what's commonly called "lazy eye" while Aunt Carrie lost sight in one eye, and had surgery to retain the use of the second.

My grandfather died before I was born, but I was told he was a no-nonsense kind of guy who was among the minority in the area able to hold onto his land during the Dirty Thirties. He expected every one of his kids to contribute to the family's livelihood, and they did. The kids got up at 5 a.m. to milk the cows and do other chores, and a round or two in the fields before walking to school. My dad often missed school to help with harvest, splitting the days away from school with his sister. And during the worst of the drought years when there was nothing to harvest, he traveled to Iowa to pick corn for a dollar a day. My Aunt Esther was the only one who graduated from high school . . . a boarding school for the blind, but she then returned to the farm, where she cooked and cleaned, milked cows, gathered the eggs, and made cream. And she occasionally spoke and played piano in church.

My Uncle Abe and Uncle George also both stayed in the home where they were born. Abe lived much of his life on the phone and in the local café. He bought and sold farm machinery through-out the southeast section of South Dakota. His frequent conversations and excellent memory served as sort of a specialized eBay for the area, connecting folks who had excess machinery with those who needed it. He loved telling jokes, and was so adept at getting around that strangers had a hard time believing he was blind. Uncle George stacked bales, built farm buildings, cared for the cattle, and maintained a large garden. My Aunt Carrie, the one who lost sight in only one eye, returned to the farm after a brief marriage, worked at a local business, and together, the four of them cared for my grandmother. Carrie's one functioning eye managed the things the others could not. In addition to her full-time job, she kept the books for Abe's business, managed all of their finances, shopped for bargains, had frequent garage sales at a sister's house in town, and bought and maintained several rental homes. And she always baked and delivered the most heavenly angel food cakes for all of her nieces' and nephews' birthdays.

It wasn't just those four siblings though. In the winter and slower times, the other siblings regularly gathered with them for the daily ritual of coffee, tea, and cookies at mid-morning. There they discussed the latest news reports, shared local gossip and family stories, and memories of how much the used cook stove had cost – the stove that burned corn cobs (trees were sparse on the prairie at the time), cooked the goose, and warmed the kitchen for more than seventy years. My dad and another brother helped Uncle George add a first story bathroom after their mother broke her hip so she could remain in that home until her death.

My Dad cleared the long driveway of snow in the winter, and later my brother took over that duty and did repairs in the home.

Now it wasn't all just tea and apple pie. There was some jealousy and occasional disagreements – they didn't all agree on the precise cost of the cook stove, for instance. There were siblings who like my Mom, didn't care for the two who seemed to control the purse strings. But disagreements mostly played out in subtle South Dakota ways. And they were ignored when someone was really in need of help. When my Aunt Esther suffered a disabling stroke, Uncle George carried her down the steep stairs to the waiting car – no need or desire to wait for an expensive ambulance. And Aunt Carrie remained with Uncle George to be his eyes long past when crippling arthritis dictated she should have moved elsewhere. Arthritis was the family's other affliction. Then five or six years ago, when a fire made that home uninhabitable, more than half of my generation from three different states gathered to salvage what we could, thankful no lives were lost, tho it was close. My Aunt Carrie called her 82 year-old brother early one morning when she smelled smoke before she called the fire department. He hopped out of bed, hustled over there, and escorted them from what by then was a very smoke-filled house.

Now, as most of you know, I wasn't the type of soul who decided to stay planted where she was born. I've been much more of a tumbling tumbleweed. But where and whenever I've moved I've searched for two things: first, for friends who can be my local family, and for a church. For younger kids to play with, for sisters of the heart, for aunts and uncles and parents. And I've been fortunate enough to find them (pick out a few – i.e., Barb and Don Hoskins, it's getting harder to find someone old enough to be my parents, so take care of yourselves, okay? Libby, thanks for being the sister who got me to UCH in the first place. Kathy Stewart, thanks for being the friend with the marvelous skill of abating some of my aches and pains).

The second thing I've always searched for is a church. I started straying from my evangelical roots while still in college. At first I sought out increasingly liberal segments of the Christian church. Then finally, finally! I found this place, the first that felt like the spiritual home I'd always been searching for. It's provided most of the family I've assembled in this state. Last Saturday when Marjy and I were scurrying around trying to finish tasks to get our house up for sale while I was also packing to catch a plane for a funeral, on that crazy day we had a wonderful crew that included Debbie Reihart, and Rima Cameron, and Laura Shemick helping us meet our deadline. Thank you. Thanks to those of you present and those no longer here that helped sustain and prepare this place for me and for others like me. And of course, thank you for providing the place where I met the love of my life, the one I'm planning to marry on October 7th. A date, at last! Thanks for being a home that celebrates our love.

My Aunt Carrie died last month at age 97. Out of my parents' sixteen siblings, that leaves me with only one living uncle, my Uncle Vert, the one who's handled the finances and now owns most of the land, tho in his defense, land at least partially earned by paying the nursing home

bills for three siblings. Maybe I'd care more about that wealth and the inequitable way it seemed to be distributed if I hadn't already received far more valuable gifts from my relatives. They taught me some of the true values of family: people who will stick with you and support you through blindness and strokes, broken hips and crippling arthritis. People who laugh at jokes they've heard many times before, who remember your birthday, the first one, and every one after that. Much more than the money or some acres, I'd love to have the ability to gather around that table by the cook stove a few more times for a few more cookies and tea and stories.

But I can't. So I'm really glad I can gather here to sing, to sit in silence, to listen, to cry and laugh, and to play. To mourn and celebrate a life on occasions like the one for David Parke tomorrow. To share my life with my chosen spiritual family. Families are far from perfect, even the average or above average ones, but it is wonderful to have one to come home to. I'm so grateful for those who have given of their time and their wealth in the past so that this home was here when I needed it. I'm hoping that as we move towards that not always comfortable pledge time of the year, you'll join me in making certain this place remains a strong and comforting presence, not just for us, but for our children, and for family we haven't yet met. Perhaps for those who don't have a birth family they either can, or want to, or should go home to, or for those who have lost most of the one they had.

I do love you, you know. You are my very precious chosen family. Please help us keep this house a loving and welcoming home for those who need it.

Amen