

Them That Sewed 'Em On
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Every year, I become more my father.
It's not just the way we stand or laugh, or the shape of
our hands.

It's who we are.

Just like him,

I'm cheap most of the time –
especially on myself –
but free-spending on meals for friends.

Just like my dad,

nothing makes me as angry as liars, charlatans, and
deliberate un-clarity.

I have my father's taste in beer.

I used to think the one thing that we'd always be
different about was our politics,
but he's become much more liberal, to my shock,
and we're on the same page there, too.

I don't have his love for golf,
but other than that, we are very similar.

Last time I was home

I even caught myself enjoying my father's music,
which was truly terrifying.

But I decided a while ago
that if I was going to be like someone,
my father was a fine choice.

I respect him, his life, his integrity.

I think that realization was the final end of adolescence
and the true beginning of adulthood.

This sermon is titled - you might have noted -

“Them that sewed `em on.”
I had a colleague in seminary;
She would often say,
“Ain’t nobody who can push your buttons
like them that sewed `em on.”

This sermon is devoted to them that sew `em on - -
not just parents,
but siblings and grandparents and the whole tribe
of ancestors and relations
who play such a big role in who we are.

We religious liberals like to talk about how families
come in all sorts of shapes and sizes.
We talk about how family is something you can create;
our theology that encourages individualism
and self-determination.
I myself like to quote the definition of family as
a group of people who share the same life chances.
It’s such a nice definition:
so inclusive and devoted to free-will.
There is something to be said for this way of thinking.

We do have power to make some choices about
families,
who we align ourselves with.
It is good to include the variety of families,
and not be stuck in some narrow definition.

But the problem with the usual liberal approach to
families
is that it does not account for complicated reality,
the fact that fate matters.
We do not choose who will sew our buttons on.

That is not up to us.
We do not choose who sewed on their buttons.
Or theirs before that.
Some things are just given.
We choose how to play our hand,
but we don't get to pick our cards –
those are dealt to us by history and the universe.
So much of our personality is set before we are even
born;
we come into a network of relations,
a patchwork of stories,
a web of meaning;
and although, from our first breath,
we start participating in and thus re-creating
these relations and stories and meanings,
they existed before us and they condition our
possibilities.
We are not their master.

This is not to say we cannot go our own way –
we can and often do.
But no matter how much we move into our own world,
we remain connected to these origins and these
histories.
They cannot be so easily waved away.

I thought if I could touch this place,
the brokenness inside me might start healing.
I thought maybe I could find myself.
You leave home, you move on,
but you can get lost in this whole world and forget who
you are.

Home is a touchstone, like it or not.

It reminds us of who we are, or at least,
who we were.

The houses that built us,
the families that shaped us,
remain with us
wherever we go.

Since I left home for college, 20 years ago -
wow, 20 years -
since that day, I've lived away.
Five hours by car for four years,
and then, in different places,
a four hour plane ride.
A three day drive.
I've put a lot of miles on my car,
and my children have frequent flyer numbers.

When I lived in Colorado Springs,
most people were in the same boat -
their families lived far away.
But here in Rockford, it is different.
In Colorado Springs, people asked "where are you
from?"
In Rockford, they ask, "What High School did you go
to?"
In Colorado Springs, 2 members of the 120 member
church were born there.
How many of you were born within 50 miles of here?

People's families are here.
That is mostly a treasure.
Mostly.

I say mostly because I recognize

that we have mixed feelings about what is called our
“families of origin.”

Sometimes we enjoy deep and fruitful connections with
our button sewers.

Sometimes we wish we were closer to them,
for the times our threads come loose
and we feel only they know how to fix it.

I thought if I touched this place,
the brokenness inside me might start healing.

But . . .

Sometimes we feel grateful for the distance we have,
or wish we had more –

that in our own space we can flourish in ways we
cannot

when we are too close to our beginnings.

Families of origins are full of life:

They can be sites of love and caring,
a deep and abiding affection for one another.

They can be sites of fear or pain,
the memories of abuse to self and other.

They can be sites of learning and inspiration.

They can be sites of longing, a wish for more,
a grief for what has passed away,
baggage, memories, and identity.

They are always,
whether we like it or not,
sites of meaning.

OK then, so what can we do about it?

How can we live with and in and from
our families,

both our families of origin and the families we build
ourselves?

Given the mixed legacies we have been left,
how do we leave good legacies for those who might
call us their family of origin?
We spend more emotional and spiritual energy
on families than almost everything else we do,
so liberal religion ought to have something helpful to
say.

I perform a lot of weddings.
I've sat through many toasts –
some awkward and some moving.

I've seen couples who have given the wedding a lot of
thought,
and the marriage very little.
And vice versa.
I've met a lot of in-laws.
When I meet people's parents,
I often say to myself,
"Oh, I see."

I can so easily imagine being in Bruce Marshall's shoes
–
to see that this teenager will be making this family
work.
It is to her that it matters most,
that it needs to be serious.

I have a rule about parenting, and ministry, and life in
general,
which I try to remember:
it's not about me.
It's not about me.
I don't know how widely this expression is shared.

You've probably heard that expression –
I raised you, you owe me.
I think this sentiment is a mistake.
Children are not playthings for adults.

We are our grandmother's prayers and our
grandfather's dreamings;
we are the breath of our ancestors.
At least, that is how it should be.

This is another way of saying that
history ought to be an inheritance,
not a debt.
A gift, not an obligation.

When one hands down
and another takes up
the heritage of mind and heart,
that ought to be a gift.
The ship that crosses the gulf of generations,
it is my hope that that ship is carefully loaded with
love,
and not with guilt, anger, or fear.
History ought to be an inheritance,
not a debt.
Each person has a unique destiny,
a power and spirit inside them,
a mission in the world,
a love in their heart,
The job of them that sew the buttons on
is to create buttons strong buttons
to help our children get through windy winter days;
functional buttons

which can be undone on hot summer days;
to sew a coat of many colors,
not a straightjacket.

And if we find that our families of origin
have sewed us buttons that do not work,
that are too tight,
or too loose,
well, it may be time to take off that cloak,
hang it in the back of the closet,
and pick up another.

Maybe –
this happens more often that you might think –
maybe our partners or friends might let us use one of
theirs.

I've been reading the Harry Potter books to my kids.
So great to pass that along to the next generation.
Harry, as most of you know, I'm sure, is more or less
an orphan,
raised by his aunt and uncle, who are straight out of a
Dickens' novel.

For Christmas one year he gets from them
a toothpick.

But Harry makes a friend on his first day of Wizard
school, Ron Weasley. Ron has five old brothers,
and one younger sister.

Every member of the family receives a knit-sweater
each Christmas.

With their initial on it.

And that first Christmas, Harry gets one too.

It is his first loving Christmas present.

Over time,

Ron's family becomes Harry's family too.

This happens.
We can get some new buttons.
The old ones never really leave us.
But the new ones can give us
the freedom to become ourselves
in ways the old ones could never do.
In the 1950's and after,
gay and lesbian people developed secret codes,
expressions,
to identify each other.
Friends of Dorothy was one,
but the main one was "family."
We are family.
Because sometimes, you need to make a new one.
Thankfully, that is changing -
and more and more folks get to keep the ones they
have
and add to it, rather than having to replace it.

Whether we add the buttons of another family
to our collection or not,
we are still faced with the task of making the most
of the hand we are dealt,
the family of origin we have.
This is good practice for us.
For we have no power to choose when and where are
born,
and this is the first in a long line of things
over which we have no power.

It seems to me that we ought to begin,
as much as we can,
with loving our family members for who they are.

We can spend all our energy trying to get them to change.

God knows, sometimes we do.

But that's a tree that will bear no fruit.

Loving people for who they are means warts and all; it means seeing their histories and their contexts – that a man raised in a certain generation is not likely to become Mr. touchy-feely.

That the parent raised with an alcoholic mother has done pretty well, considering.

Loving people for who they are – it is a difficult task.

Sometimes it is more than we can do.

But we can keep working at it.

The other side of that coin is that we need to insist that our families of origin – them that sewed 'em on – love us for who we are.

That they respect our choices, our faith, our families.

It will be harder to do this,

by the way,

if we can't love ourselves for who we are –

these tasks, of course, being closely intertwined.

The joke about loving your neighbor as yourself is that most of us do –

we just don't love ourselves very much, so no wonder the neighbor gets it bad.

For families, double that.

We have to love ourselves.

If our families treat us without respect,

we have to say,

“this isn’t OK.”

It is entirely appropriate for us
to set firm boundaries --
to set them and keep them.

Love for ourselves and a proper sense of our own
dignity

demand that we do so.

And when our families do love us for who we are,
when they encourage us to reach for the stars,
we should say, “thank you,”
and return the favor.

History should be an inheritance,
not a debt.

We have some power over that.

Rifling through the old family files,
we will find both debts and gifts;
we can choose on which to focus.

Some debts may have to be paid,
but others can be written off –
no longer owed.

The gifts, the grace, the stories and the hopes,
they can continue in us.

We can choose to love our sewers,
to love ourselves,
to move forward with gratitude and hope.

This is the good news of liberal religion:

yes, some things are given to us.

We have no choice on that.

But we have a chance – a chance to find beauty and
wisdom wherever we find ourselves.

For there is beauty and wisdom everywhere,

if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.
We have a chance to stand up for ourselves,
to insist on dignity and integrity,
since all people deserve dignity.
We have a chance to love without hope of reward,
as we are loved without judgment
by what is holy and wondrous.
And we have a chance to begin anew,
as new life is always springing up in us
and around us.
May love and hope guide our ways,
our families - near and far -
and the world we share.
Amen, blessed be.