
Forgetting to be Faith-less

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In the name of God: Our Maker, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend. Amen.

If you're like me you rarely take time to read "The Dean's Notes." It's on that bulletin board across from our parish hall" Child Hall; just before the doors that lead out to the horseshoe drive and the St. Francis memorial garden. It's a collection of news articles, media coverage of current affairs, miscellaneous items about religion, and so-called "human interest" stories.

As I say, I don't often allow myself the leisure to read what Dean Candler so thoughtfully posts there. But last week I did. As usual, I might add, I was richly rewarded. Here's the story I found there. And providentially, it relates to today's gospel. Let's see if you agree.

The author is Laura Munson, a writer who lives in a place in Montana called "Whitefish." She begins the article like this: Let's say you have what you believe to be a healthy marriage. You're still friends and lovers after spending more than half of your lives together. The dreams you set out to achieve in your 20s . . . [back] when you were single and skinny "" have for the most part come true.

Two decades later you have the 20 acres of land, the farmhouse, the children, the dogs and horses. You're the parents you said you would be, full of love and guidance. You've done it all: Disneyland, camping, Hawaii . . . city living, stargazing. Sure, you have your marital issues, but on the whole you feel so self-satisfied about how things have worked out that you would never, in your wildest nightmares, think you would hear these words from your husband one fine summer day: "I don't love you anymore. I'm not sure I ever did. I'm moving out. The kids will understand. They'll want me to be happy." But wait [the author hastens to say]. This isn't the divorce story you think it is. Neither is it a begging-him-to-stay story. It's a story about hearing your husband say "I don't love you anymore" and deciding not to believe him. And what can happen as a result.

Here's a visual: Child throws a temper tantrum. Tries to hit his mother. But the mother doesn't hit back, lecture or punish. Instead, she ducks. Then she tries to go about her business as if the tantrum isn't happening. She doesn't "reward" the tantrum. She simply doesn't take the tantrum personally because, after all, it's not about her.

Let me be clear: I'm not saying my husband was throwing a child's tantrum. No. He was in the grip of something else "" a profound and far more troubling meltdown that comes not in childhood but in midlife, when we perceive that our personal trajectory is no longer arcing reliably upward as it once did. But I decided to respond the same way I'd responded to my children's tantrums. And I kept responding to it that way. For four months.

"I don't love you anymore. I'm not sure I ever did."

His words came at me like a speeding fist, like a sucker punch, yet somehow in that moment I was able to duck. And once I recovered and composed myself, I managed to say, "I don't buy it." Because I didn't.

He drew back in surprise. Apparently he'd expected me to burst into tears, to rage at him, to threaten him with a custody battle. Or beg him to change his mind.

So he turned mean. "I don't like what you've become" [he said].

Gut-wrenching pause. How could he say such a thing? That's when I really wanted to fight. To rage. To cry. But I didn't. Instead, a shroud of calm enveloped me, and I repeated those words: "I don't buy it."

You see, I'd recently committed to a non-negotiable understanding with myself. I'd committed to "The End of Suffering." I'd finally managed to exile the voices in my head that told me my personal happiness was . . . [based on] my outward success, rooted in things that were often outside my control. I'd seen the insanity of that equation and decided to take responsibility for my own happiness. And I mean all of it.

My husband hadn't yet come to this understanding with himself. He had enjoyed many years of hard work, and its rewards had supported our family of four all along. But his new endeavor hadn't been going so well, and his ability to be the breadwinner was in rapid decline. He'd been miserable about this, felt useless, was losing himself emotionally and letting himself go physically. And now he wanted out of our marriage; to be done with our family.

But I wasn't buying it.

Now that's how Laura Munson begins her story. You can already tell she's a masterful storyteller. She already has us in the grip of her story. And she's not a bad amateur psychologist either. Let me highlight just the psychological turning points in the rest of the story. And I'll risk spoiling it for you since, like me, except on rare occasions you probably won't find the time to stand there and read the whole article on the bulletin board in that hallway.

Instead of fighting back at her husband or just going along with his program, Laura Munson had the fortitude to offer him some options. And those options did not depend on his doing anything for her, or with her and the children, but for himself and by himself. She told him to take some time away.

"Go trekking in Nepal [she said]. Build a yurt in the back meadow. Turn the garage studio into a man-cave. Get that drum set you've always wanted. Anything but hurting the children and me with a reckless move like the one you're talking about."

Then I repeated my line, "What can we do to give you the distance you need, without hurting the family?"

"Huh?" [he said.]

And he kept saying things like, "Huh," or "Stop saying that!" or "I don't want distance . . . I want to move out." And Laura Munson, God bless her, just kept her distance as if this really was his issue and not hers. That is, she kept on letting him decide for himself how he did or did not want to relate to her and the family.

"Oh, I see what you're doing" [he said]. "You're going to make me go into therapy. You're not going to let me move out. You're going to use the kids against me."

No, she insisted. She really was not trying to "manage" him or the situation. But she did insist on managing herself and her life as a responsible parent with children to raise "with or without his involvement."

Instead of issuing ultimatums [she writes], yelling, crying or begging, I presented him with options. I created a summer of fun for our family and welcomed him to share in it, or not "it was up to him. If he chose not to come along, we would miss him, but we would be just fine, thank you very much. And we were."

And, yeah, you can bet I wanted to sit him down and persuade him to stay. To love me. To fight for what we've created.

You can bet I wanted to.

But I didn't.

I barbecued. Made lemonade. Set the table for four. Loved him from afar.

Well, he didn't move out.

Instead, he spent the summer being unreliable. He stopped coming home at his usual six o'clock. He would stay out late and not call. He blew off our entire Fourth of July "the parade, the barbecue, the fireworks" to go to someone else's party. When he was at home, he was distant. He wouldn't look me in the eye. He didn't even wish me "Happy Birthday."

But I didn't play into it. I walked my line. I told the kids: "Daddy's having a hard time as adults often do. But we're a family, no matter what." I was not going to suffer. And neither were they . . .

By the way she admits, "I had good days and I had bad days." And she also admits that mentally "not in his hearing" she gave him six months to continue his behavior.

On the good days [she continues], I took the high road. I ignored his lashing out, his merciless jabs. On bad days, I would fester in the August sun while the kids ran through sprinklers, raging at him in my mind. But I never wavered. Although it may sound ridiculous to say "Don't take it personally" when your husband tells you he no longer loves you, sometimes that's exactly what you have to do . . .

And one day, there he was, home from work early, mowing the lawn. A man doesn't mow his lawn if he's going to leave it. Not this man. Then he fixed a door that had been broken for eight years. He made a comment about our front porch needing paint. Our front porch. He mentioned needing wood for next winter. The future. Little by little, he started talking about the future. [Emphases here & elsewhere mine]

It was Thanksgiving dinner that sealed it. My husband bowed his head humbly and said, "I'm thankful for my family." He was back.

And I saw what had been missing: pride. He'd lost pride in himself. Maybe that's what happens when our egos take a hit in midlife and we realize we're not as young and golden anymore.

When life's knocked us around. And our childhood myths reveal themselves to be just that. The truth feels like the biggest sucker-punch of them all: it's not a spouse or land or a job or money that brings us happiness. Those achievements, those relationships, can enhance our happiness, yes, but happiness has to start from within. Relying on any other equation can be lethal.

My husband had become lost in the myth. But he found his way out. We've since had the hard conversations. In fact, he encouraged me to write about our ordeal. To help other couples who arrive at this juncture in life. People who feel scared and stuck. Who believe their temporary feelings are permanent. Who see an easy out, and think they can escape.

My husband tried to strike a deal. Blame me for his pain. Unload his feelings of personal disgrace onto me.

But I ducked. And I waited. And it worked."

"Laura A. Munson, "Those Aren't Fighting Words, Dear," Fashion & Style, Modern Love. New York Times, August 2, 2009. Accessed by this author on September 5, 2009 at www.nytimes.com/2009/08/02/fashion/02love.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print

Well, that's Laura Munson's story. But please don't hear it the wrong way! Especially if you're a former divorcee, like me in my first marriage, I beg us not to compare our story to her story and feel defensive or offensive about our failure to avoid divorce in our marriages. That's not the point.

Rather, let's do something more useful. Let's leverage her story against the fact that we are hearing it in the context of our being together in this sacred space today. Let's compare her story to the gospel story.

Again we have a woman who is being rebuffed""this time by this Jewish prophet called Jesus to whom she has appealed to heal her spiritually oppressed daughter. And likewise in this story the intimidation is quite intense""intense to the point of the woman being called an ethnic slur by this Jewish prophet.

That's right: this is that infamous gospel story where Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ calls someone an ethnic slur. This is that passage where he calls his interlocutor, a "Gentile dog."

There it is in black and white, in the 7th chapter of Mark's gospel:

Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter (7.26).

And this was Jesus' response: "Let the children be fed first," he said, referring to his own people. And then: "for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (7.27) referring to her people.

That's called an "ethnic slur,' isn't it? There's no way to whitewash it, just because Jesus said it. In fact, if we downplay the harshness of the term we lose some of the cleverness of the woman's response, and some of the significance of Jesus' being influenced by that response. So what does she do?

She answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (7.28).

Now what just happened there? Does she get offended, or on the other hand intimidated? Does she call him a "dog' back""a Jewish dog, for example? Or does she cave-in and wilt like a flower, or slink off in defeat just like a kicked dog?

No; she does neither, does she? Neither "fight nor flight,' as they say. But she does a third thing. In fact she does what theologian Walter Wink calls, "Jesus' third way."

Neither fight nor flight but faith instead: faith in an ultimate reality in which one does not need to either attack or be a victim. Instead the challenge is to count on a providence that will fulfill your efforts to be faithful beyond the context of the immediate situation you are facing. Let me repeat that: the challenge is to count on a providence that will fulfill your efforts

to be faithful beyond the context of the immediate situation you are facing.

That is what both Laura Munson and the Syrophoenician woman did in their very different but mutually instructive stories. Not based on what I see, but on the basis of faith in something unseen—something that is not immediately presenting itself but on which I stake my fortunes and my future—on that basis I believe and I speak and I act.

Now how can we achieve or sustain such faith and such fortitude? Here I can commend to you that phrase that I proclaim from the pulpit at least four times a year. It's the title to the book by my colleague, Brian Mahan, *Forgetting Ourselves on Purpose* (Vocation and the Ethics of Ambition).

Christian friends, let's live up to our mature spirituality in the days ahead. Let's forget the self we have formerly lived-out; that self who is anxious or fearful, chronically defensive or offended, easily angered or intimidated, and who takes life personally as if everything is about us rather than the other person or persons.

Thus Laura Munson effectively "forgot" to be the wounded victim in her non-divorce story. (And here again, fellow divorcees, don't you dare feel like a failure if you're tempted to compare her story to your story. Let's just "forget ourselves on purpose" for a minute here, okay?)—just long enough to hear the gospel on its own terms.)

And how about that Syrophoenician woman? Didn't she effectively "forget" to be offended when she was called an ethnic slur, didn't she?—Because she kept her eyes on something bigger than defending her wounded pride or feeling wounded and defeated.

What would it be like to "forget ourselves" in that way—to "forget ourselves on purpose"?

And from now on, why not "forget ourselves on purpose" too? As a mark of our maturing faith and fortitude, I invite you to join me in this gospel venture: Forgetting to be faith-less, while holding fast to the things that are unseen and eternal; the things kept secure for us not by the world, nor by circumstances in this life, but vouchsafed to us by a providential God through Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There follows a humorous illustration that I could not share in the sermon that Sunday due to time. Nonetheless I include it here as I would like to have said it, immediately following the sentence above: "What would it be like to "forget ourselves" in that way—to "forget ourselves on purpose?"

Allow me to shift the tone here and offer a humorous example.

A couple in their nineties are both having problems remembering things. During a checkup, the doctor tells them that they're physically okay, but they might want to start writing things down to help them remember

Later that night, while watching TV, the [husband] gets up from his chair. 'Want anything while I'm in the kitchen?' he asks.

'Will you get me a bowl of ice cream?'

'Sure,' [he replies].

'Don't you think you should write it down so you can remember it?' she asks.

'No, I can remember it.'

'Well, I'd like some strawberries on top, too.'

Maybe you should write it down, so's not to forget it?'

He says, 'I can remember that. You want a bowl of ice cream with strawberries.'

'I'd also like whipped cream. I'm certain you'll forget that. Will you write it down?' she asks.

Irritated, he says, 'I don't need to write it down, I can remember it! Ice cream with strawberries and whipped cream - I got it, for goodness sake!'

Then he ambles into the kitchen. After about 20 minutes, [he] returns from the kitchen and hands his wife a plate of bacon and eggs. She stares at the plate for a moment.

"Okay!" she says finally. "You got most of it right. But I said bacon, eggs, and toast. Where's my toast?"

Well that's one way to "forget ourselves," isn't it? Although in this case it really wasn't forgetting on purpose. Now to my fellow seniors: It looks like I'm picking on us as prime examples of forgetfulness. anything while I'm in the kitchen?' he asks.

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Well that's one way to "forget ourselves," isn't it? Although in this case it really wasn't forgetting on purpose. Now to my fellow seniors: It looks like I'm picking on us as prime examples of forgetfulness. But I appeal to you in the spirit of good humor to indulge me here! To what other demographic can I turn for such lighthearted examples? In any case, the real point is our ability as elders to forget certain things as a mark of our maturity.

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