

Pastor's Pen: A Lost Sheep Comes Home Part 1

Many times, as a Catholic pastor, I will get approached by parents who are upset about or grieving a son who has abandoned the faith. It seems a weekly occurrence. Some wonder where things went wrong, seeing their son's rejection of the faith as a failure on their part to raise the child correctly. Some believe they did everything they could but that their son still rejected the faith. For some parents, this is a deeply painful rejection not just of faith, but of themselves as well.

I suppose I get approached with this as much as I do because of my own story. I was an agnostic. I was one for a long time. Officially I was for about 4 or 5 years, but for much of my life before that, I was as well. This might seem strange to those who know me and know I was in a high school seminary.

I am reticent to write much about how I became agnostic as it would seem to be a condemnation of family, friends, and others of influence in my life. I do not wish to do this as, with very few exceptions, no one tried to drive me into a lack of faith. I will write, though, because it might be instructive to parents, teachers, my brother clergy, and even to the young man who has abandoned faith.

I will readily admit that no two stories are the same. What contributed to my path is unique to me. However, there are more things that unite us in the human experience than separate us. Take from this what you want.

A Tale of Two Gods

In my youth, I was presented with two very different gods.

God A was an angry guy. If He loved us, it was begrudgingly so. He didn't like us. Sure, He sent His Son and all, but even that seemed like just another reason for angry god to be angry with us. This god has a long list of the hell bound. This god loved entrapment. He allows us to be tempted and then slams us when we fall. Love, to this God, was a fearful submission. He was an all-powerful bully. Worship was appeasement; worship was stroking the eternal ego of angry god. Angry god was like a cat...three strokes on the belly to make me happy, four strokes and I will gnaw your hand off!

God B was fluffy guy. He was a peace, love, and crunchy granola type. He was the smiling hippie who just oozed positive emotions. Honestly, he was kind of really effeminate and hard to take seriously. He was little more than a numbing agent when life got hard. He was effective at guiding me in life as a untrained golden retriever puppy. I love Golden Retrievers. Don't get me wrong. There was, however, very little about this god that a young man, such as myself, saw as worthy of my time.

I wanted nothing to do with either version. It seemed all wrong. I couldn't tell you why it was all wrong, but my gut told me it was. That was problematic. I was looking for an identity, especially in what it meant to be a man. Either god's definition of manhood, so much based in their own definition, left me cold. I didn't want to be the angry guy. I didn't want to be the wuss either.

Wandering

My 7th and 8th grade years were brutal. In sixth grade, when my family lived in Kentucky, my dad, siblings, and I converted to Catholicism from being kind of Protestants. I got my first real good look at angry god. My classmates started bullying me, friends abandoned me, and I felt isolated quickly. I was told I was going to hell. We moved to Missouri and I was put into a Catholic school. I fared no better there. Being excessively short and scrawny for my age, I was a prime target for bullying. It was

the first time I was exposed to a religion class as a part of the regular curriculum, and it was there I got exposed to fluffy god. It was also where I first had my first real doubts. You see, we talked about fluffy, happy Jesus who just loved, loved, loved. Problem was, that was far from my experience with those Catholics around me.

Home life was little respite. The breakdown of family was starting in earnest and would drag out for the next 8 years. Fluffy god wasn't terribly effective at stopping the breakdown. No matter how much religion we jammed into our lives, the breakdown didn't stop.

I ended up in high school seminary for one reason and one reason only: it got me out of my home and away from my home town. Things were better there than at home. Even there, though, was still fluffy god. I paid lip service to thinking about priesthood. I had to. The alternative was going back to what I was trying to escape. I did love my family, even with all the dysfunction. However, if I never saw my old schoolmates and the parish again, I would be okay. I did like the pastor of my parish. He was a good guy who did try hard. He was the one thing that kept me attached to faith of any kind; at least a willingness to stay nominally Catholic.

I had no relationship with God though. I went to Mass every day. I had to. I prayed morning and evening prayer every day. I had to. I went to religion class 5 times a day. I had to. Honestly, there wasn't too much loopy going on; but it left me cold. I felt nothing. I had some friends. That was enough...that and it wasn't my home town. There was some comfort in going through the motions.

When I graduated, I went to college seminary. I went because it was expected. I was on my way into drifting into the priesthood. It was there that a new ugly beast arose. In high school seminary, we were generally taught to believe what the Church teaches. But, in my first three years of college... not so much. Whatever faith was there died. Everything was an argument, even what we could call the persons of the Trinity. Church moral teaching was at best a buffet in which each was presented in the worst possible light. I hated going to Mass and prayer. I skipped quite a bit. Everything seemed empty. I struggled. I started dating girls in secret. I was disconnecting from something I was barely connected to at all.

Even with all this, I still thought I was going to be a priest. Heaven knows why, I didn't believe. I ended up transferring seminaries my senior year. A part of me knew that if I were going to make the next step, then a change of venue was going to be necessary. I wish I had gone to that seminary all along. This story might have taken a different turn. There, I got the closest I had gotten to an encounter with the actual God. But, right on cue, the second semester of my senior year, my parents separated for the last time. God once again seemed impotent. I was furious. My fury was picked up by the review board for the theologate and they recommended I wait till the dust settled before I went on. In my mind's eye, the impotent god's failure was incomplete. I went back to my practical agnosticism.

Going home, now in New York, religion became something I couldn't abandon altogether. I still went to Mass so as not to scandalize my family. The pastor, though, was an idiot who loved angry god. Our fights were many. Even with that, once he found out I had been a seminarian, a full court press was started to get me back in the seminary. I went. It was a huge mistake. The place I went for less than one year was such a troubling place where faith was drained and an uberliberal anti-faith rose in its place. I finally was convinced to quit going through the motions. I left the seminary and the faith.

To be continued next week