

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

A Genealogy of God's Mercy

by Deacon Stephen Muse

The Muse side of my family can trace our roots back to the 1500's in Soul-drop Parish in Lancashire, England. The Trevathan side, my mother's, are from Cornwall, England. I find the older I get, the more interesting I find such things, not because I am particularly proud of my name or heritage, but because history becomes more palpable – a part of the present, like approaching a holy relic. Elder Sophrony says that all of time and space fit into eternity. History is His Story and ours. The origins and relationship of all things past are contained in all things present.

In our family, when our last child, now thirty, headed off to college, it sparked the empty nest, rearranging and rediscovering our lives together. One of my colleagues reminded me at the time, "Life looks different when you've passed the half-way mark." I'm sixty now and hope to live to a hundred, but I know he's right. I felt changes in my outlook beginning many years ago. It has been a fascinating journey and I notice several things happening as I age, other than losing the hair on my head while gaining more in my ears and nose and eyebrows.

I find the bits and pieces of everyday life much more precious than the hopes and dreams of an un-lived future. Clouds passing in the sky on a moist and windy day. A crane stretching its neck in Cooper Creek as it walks on its stilted legs reminds me of a theologian I know. The hammering of a Flicker on the drum of a hollow tree trunk sounds the talanton for a worship not created by human hands. My wife's sparkling eyes, and the joy engendered in me noticing a flower she has planted in the yard all make me grateful and can start the Jesus Prayer going. Only it isn't enough to slake the thirst to offer thanksgiving that can't ever seem to match the gift that is being given.

Being able to breathe and know I am alive is more and more precious. As the list of treasured encounters grows, memories pile up and they get better and better as the years go by. Pain is forgotten. Joy remembered. Marrying. The miracle of our first child's birth. Being warm around a wood stove and raising our children in the midst of the beautiful rolling farmhills of Eastern Pennsylvania are memories that have become so precious with the years my heart overflows when I remember them. I am today a grateful man for the gift of those years alone. And yet when we lived them we had tremendous trials and tribulations. But like the labor of a woman in travail of birth, all that is remembered is the laughter and giggles and love of children, the friendship of unexpected persons who cared and the spiritual bond that links a husband and wife together through the joys and sorrows of shared pilgrimage, labors and love. I am so grateful to have had a partner to walk the Emmaus road with. The gift of marriage and bearing children is a miracle. Imagine: total strangers from different cultures and family backgrounds encounter each other and choose to be joined forever in a spiritual covenant, ready to love all that is produced through their union.

Our children become our teachers. Their challenges and disobedience,



their discoveries in areas outside what we would have ever dreamed of doing, become living reminders of the mercy of God who endures all for each of us. All of us on the earth are related to everyone else biologically just as we appear to have derived our existential conditions from the first couple who sprang from the mouth of God.

Yes, the closer death gets, the more sober I am and the more precious life reveals itself to be. Now I want to live longer in order to repent for being unworthy of it all and to give thanks for the eucharistic gift.

The fewer choices I have, the more important each one becomes.

The more attentive I am to what I experience in the moment, the more is revealed of what cannot be seen with the eye.

The faster time passes with the years, the more I realize all that I will never get to do. But there is a greater peace in my heart, because I know that behind and through it all is Christ, the source of every good thing.

Like the skin horse and the velveteen rabbit in Marjorie Williams' beloved children story, well worn people begin to have more and more forgiveness and mercy toward what goes wrong, because they begin to realize how much mercy and forgiveness and love have made it possible for them to live when they went wrong.

Love and thanksgiving grow with age as we surrender our bodies to the effects of time and our physical vitality wears away. Our minds lose their sharpness and our eyes cloud over. Our joints ache. And in all this, the heart grows more and more acutely aware of how very, very precious is this event called life that lives itself through us by the

Grace and love of God. We are a royal priesthood through whom God wants to re-member Himself. Our situation helps us recognize what St. Maximos the Confessor observed, that our very lives are on loan to us. Life was not "ours" to begin with. We cannot hold on to it by anything we do, think, feel, say or will.

My granddaddy used to let me drive the car sitting in his lap when I was a young boy. I had the steering wheel, so I thought. My legs didn't even reach the pedals. No matter. I was driving! I did the same with my children. Now I realize, the older I get, that God has been doing that with me all my life. My legs don't reach the pedals. But I have the thought often that I am doing the driving and I'm sure to some extent, that God is preparing me to be able to extend His reach into the world through loving obedience. After all, it is the Father's good pleasure to give us the Kingdom.

If we discover this one thing over a lifetime, it may be the most important. Thanksgiving that emerges for the privilege of being born is a recognition that God in Christ wishes to give us His whole life as our own. Learning that we want it so much, that we will give our own lives in return for His is the great and divine eucharistic mystery at the heart of the marriage between heaven and earth.

I wonder what it will be like after I die—is that is when I finally grow up? If eternity is even a fraction as marvelous as the taste of life has been in time, my heart will need infinite Grace to be able to receive and express the joy of that worship. But first we each will face the task of saying good-bye to our beloved and to all the life we have ever known. This moment of giving up we cannot know ahead of time, and the sorrow will be turned to joy. Like a newborn babe,

God will wipe every tear from our eyes and we will no longer see as in a mirror dimly, but face to face with the Light that enlighten all humankind.

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FOR PRAYER:

PRAYER OF ST. PAUL FOR THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

(Ephesians 3:14-21)

FOR FAMILIES: MAKE A FAMILY ICON TREE

You don't need to be an amazing artist to do this—anyone can assemble it. To begin, get a pre-cut piece of wood on and stain or paint it the desired color. Once it has dried, sketch a tree with enough branches for each member of your family and paint it.

Find small paper icons of Christ and the patron saint of each of your family members (Holy Transfiguration Monastery is a good source for these. www.thehtm.org). Use Mod Podge to affix the icon of Christ to the trunk and the patron saints to the branches. Decorate the tree by painting fruit, flowers, and leaves. Put a final coat of protective sealant; this can be found at an art supply store. Finally, give the icon to your priest to be blessed.

Family Connections is a ministry of the Center for Family Care of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America.

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The Center for Family Care was established with a major grant from the Archbishop Iakovos Leadership 100 Endowment Fund, Inc.

We are grateful for its support.

