

LIKE MOTHER'S MILK

As many of you know, I love a good pun--even a lousy one! In fact, I come from a long line of punsters, and am happy to report it has been passed on to the next generation. About once a week or so one or another of my children will post a text message to the family with a pun in it. And with that we are off and running. Posting text after text, building off of the original pun.

It happened just this week. It started with a cartoon of two cows standing upright and working at the counter of a coffee shop. A big sign on the counter read, "Thank you for not tipping!"

Immediately my daughter Liz posted, "But what if the service is the cream of the crop?"

My oldest son chimed in, "They must get a beefy salary."

I texted, "We'll milk this one for all it's worth."

To which my wife Linda responded, "John, who are you trying to butter up?"

"You I guess," I responded, "since you are so moovelous!"

And on it went, with close to a dozen more texts, including one from Linda that read: "Do you think a cow says to it's calf, "Shut the door. You'd think you were brought up in a barn!"

We had a lot of fun with the cow and milk related puns. But in the world of words, milk isn't just the basis for a lot of puns, it is also a frequently used metaphor. As it is in our second scripture reading this morning.

The New Testament book we call First Peter was written as a circular letter, intended to be passed around from one church to another in Asia Minor--modern day Turkey. It would have been carried from place to place and read aloud during worship.

The churches in Asia Minor were made up of men and women who were not, if you'll pardon the pun, the cream of society. In fact, they were in the lowest echelons. They were Gentiles, not Jews, who had responded to the gospel and had become followers of Jesus and who were beginning to be called Christians. It was a term of derision meaning "Little Christs" --and would have been hurled as an insult--"Oh look at those little Christs!" Most of them were probably slaves, and many of them were women, often married to men who were not followers of Jesus. Because they did not follow the religion of the head of the household--that of either their Master or their husband--they were violating the societal norms of the

time, and seen as a threat to proper social order. So it was that being a Christian in that time and place was not only a liability of sorts. It also often carried a real measure of risk.

This letter then was written not only to offer words of instruction, how best to follow Jesus, how best to be the church, but also to offer words of encouragement for these fairly new Christians. As one scholar writes, “This is thus a letter of comfort, intended to assure [them] that, no matter how their neighbors criticize them God says they are right to hold fast to their . . . faith” (E. Elizabeth Johnson, *Feasting on the Word*, A:2, 391)

Comfort is something we all long for, isn't it? Indeed, in the midst of this pandemic, we've often turned to so-called comfort foods, things like homemade macaroni and cheese, meatloaf, and so on. Meals that help to ease our fears and calm our worries. I heard just this week that the number one recipe being looked for on Google is banana bread. Now there is a comfort food! Such foods remind many of us of the safety we felt when we sat at our mother's table, don't they? One of my favorite comfort foods is spaghetti and meat sauce. Mom used to make it regularly--and it was always a soothing meal.

The ultimate comfort food, though, is milk. OK, milk *and* cookies for some folks. Like what Mom gave you when you came home from school. But unless you are lactose intolerant, there's just something about milk that is soothing, calming, comforting. Perhaps because it subconsciously reminds us of our earliest days when all our dietary needs were met by mother's milk, and the close and intimate way we were fed, nestled against her bosom. That milk provided everything we needed to thrive and grow. It even provided a measure of immunity to various diseases. A natural vaccine if you will.

It is that kind of milk, mother's milk, that the author of First Peter is thinking of as he writes, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation--if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” (1 Peter 2:2-3) So just what does he mean by the term “pure spiritual milk”? And why does he employ this particular analogy, conjuring up the image of an infant longing for mother's milk?

I'm convinced that the pure spiritual milk that Peter refers to is one's relationship to God. That is what the author says we are to long for, a close relationship with the Holy One. A nurturing relationship with the One who is the source of all goodness, even as a mother's milk is the source of all the nutrients an infant needs. That relationship itself, must be nourished by prayer, meditation, study of the tradition and the scriptures, and by practicing deeds of kindness, compassion, justice, healing and love. That relationship must be tended to if it's potential is to be realized in our lives.

Have you ever been in the presence of an infant who was overdue for her feeding? The need is so great, so intense, that he starts to cry and fuss, and when the little one is finally picked

up and snuggled next to mother, you can literally hear as he or she latches on and begins to feed. Having tasted mother's milk, having had the deep need for sustenance filled by not only the milk itself, but by the love that comes with it, the infant is not satisfied until his or her belly is full. That is the kind of urgency and longing Peter suggests we will experience, once we have tasted that the Lord is good. We are to long for that kind of loving, nurturing relationship with God.

As long as I have been aware, my mother has served as a good role model in all of this. Her faith journey began when she was a young girl. While my grandparents were wonderful people, even what we might call spiritual, they were not involved in any church. But when my mother felt a need to go to church and explore her relationship with God, they said, sure, just don't expect us to go.

And so, she did. She trundled off to a nearby church, and got very involved. Over time she felt a call to go to seminary and to become an ordained minister. And so, she headed north, to Bangor, Maine, and enrolled at Bangor Theological Seminary. One of only two women in the student body. In time she met my Dad. Soon, her hopes of being a pastor were ended as she got married, and then a year later, gave birth to me. Two years later, my Dad was ordained and they moved off to his first full-time parish.

Despite not moving towards ordination my mother's relationship with God did not come to a crashing halt. In those days being a pastor's wife came with certain expectation that you would teach Sunday School, bake cookies for the bazaar and even visit parishioners in their homes. Mom did all that, and, I think, for the most part willingly, but her faith journey, her relationship with God, was far more complex and involved. Over the years she has found many, many ways to nurture that relationship. Retreats, classes, leading Bible studies, and volunteering at soup kitchens. She had and has a very real set of spiritual disciplines. To this day, her practice of getting up very early, often before the sun rises, and spending a good hour in prayer and scripture reading and journaling, has endured. Not out of a sense of duty, but rather because she sees it as vital to her very being.

Often over the years she has spoken of the deep longing she experiences for closer union with God. The infant's desire for his or her mother's milk, is but a foreshadowing of the inborn desire for a close relationship with God. Mother often references one of her favorite authors, C. S. Lewis, who frequently spoke of that longing. "Probably earthly pleasures," he once said, "were never meant to satisfy [our longing for God], but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing . . ." (*Mere Christianity*, 136)

Growing up I took comfort in the foods that mother prepared for us. And there were times when I came home from school longing for a glass of milk and a homemade chocolate chip

cookie. And often those were provided. But in later years, I have come to realize that my deeper longing was like hers. And while I have frequently forgotten that the only real and lasting satisfaction comes from a close relationship to God, that longing has often pulled me back when I have gone astray. I am grateful for her modeling of many ways to nurture that relationship, and pray that your memories and experiences of your mom, or step-mom, or sister, aunt or friend has shown you as well ways you can find your deepest longings met. For it is only when you rely on God's love that your deepest longing is met, and you find a real and lasting measure of satisfaction, of comfort and of peace.

Amen

John H. Danner