

# Pickles, Black Ties, Boxes & Tears

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Hebrews 4:12-16; John 11:28-35

October 18, 2009

(Ordinary Time)

**Let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

Preachers need help. Don't tell anyone, mind you, but some of us need *more* help than *others*. You could at least *look* surprised, you know. *Pretend* to be shocked. I know you *aren't*, of course. Because John Mendez was your pastor, once. And Bill Knicely. And Wendell. And Bill Deel ... He needed help. *Professional* help, according to some people. And I need it, too. We all do, I think. One of the first things older pastors tell young pastors when they're released from seminary is, "Don't be a Lone Ranger. Don't try to go it alone," they say, "because you'll burn out. You won't make it. They'll find you wondering the streets some day with a blank sort of look on your face, trying to shake hands with every person you see -- cabdrivers,

policemen, little children, stray dogs ... "The Lord be with you," you'll say to them. Over and over. "So don't do it," they say. "Don't go it alone in the ministry. Preachers need help." And they're right. Believe me. Preachers need help. I found that out a long time ago.

So, I always tried to find someone I could turn to for some sound advice and wise counsel -- something like a mentor, I guess, who'd just take me under his wing and encourage me. And I found one who was perfect. I mean, this guy knew where I was coming from. And he was so understanding and kind and supportive. He wasn't older, though. In fact, he was a bit younger. His name was Patrick ... and he was about four, I think. Four years old.

I'd come home every now and then with a migraine headache. And Patrick would do everything he could to make me feel better. He'd tell me to lie down on the bed. And then he would disappear for a minute or two. And when he came back he would have a soft pillow for my head -- to put on top of my head, mind you, where it was hurting. And he'd bring in some stuffed animals -- Winnie the Pooh, and Eeyore, and Tigger and maybe a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle or two. And he'd put them on and around my head. And he'd say, "That will make you feel

better.” And it did. It made me feel better. The headache may not have gone away, mind you. But it was a wonderful feeling.... That was when he was a wee little kid with blonde hair and bangs.

And when he was four, Patrick *loved* kosher dill pickles. He’d grab a big pickle from the jar and he’d eat the whole thing. I mean, he loved them. Couldn’t *keep* enough of them, he liked them so much.

One day I came home from the church in Huntington. And I was a little down in the dumps. Because the church seemed to be in a slump at that time. Attendance down a bit. And so was giving. And there were people in the church who didn’t see eye to eye -- people criticizing each other and talking about each other. One woman came to the study and just went on and on about the toilet paper in the women’s restroom. Honestly, mind you -- this is the truth. It was too rough, she said. “Might as well be sandpaper. Where in the world are they buying this stuff?” I said, “Lowe’s, I think. They buy it at Lowe’s.” ✕ I just wanted to make her smile. But she didn’t think it was funny, at all.

There was another woman who greeted me after church one Sunday and said, “I didn’t get a thing out of

that service today, because the candle on the right side of the altar was at least a half inch farther away from the cross than the one on the left! And that’s all I could think about,” she said. Isn’t that awful? I thought it was my fault. Not the candle, really. I thought it was my fault that this poor woman was so shallow. It was my fault that she wasn’t more aware of God’s presence. I hadn’t taught her. I hadn’t preached well enough. I hadn’t drawn her attention to God.”

There was all kinds of stuff dragging me down. And I was having one of those days, you know, when you just feel like you can’t do anything right. I was down in the dumps. So I went home... And there sat Patrick at the dining room table with a big jar of pickles. So I sat down beside him. And he looked at me and said, “You don’t feel good, do you dad?”

“No,” I said. “Not too good.”

And he said, “You aren’t very happy are you?”

And I shook my head, “No.”

And he reached in the jar and pulled out a big pickle. And that’s when I noticed there had been only one pickle

in the jar. He looked at me and said, “You can have my pickle... It’ll make you feel better.”

“Oh, Patrick, I can’t take your last pickle.”

“But mom can go to the store and get some more,” he said. But after that, I didn’t need it. Just to think that a four year old pickle-lover would give me his last pickle was enough to make me feel better. It didn’t make more people come to church or keep them from complaining about silly little things like candles and toilet paper, mind you. But it made me feel so much better. ✕

A few years later, Patrick was the one who was down in the dumps. He was eight, almost nine, I think. And his best friend, Luke, was diagnosed with a brain tumor. And Patrick was there for Luke’s birthday that year and they had a great time together. And then Kristof and Patrick went to St. Louis to spend a week or two with Ann’s sister, Sherri. And while they were there, Luke died. So the very next day, on the fourth of July, we drove to St. Louis to tell him. And everybody left. It was just Patrick and me. And Patrick sat beside me on the couch. And I told him as gently as I could that Luke had passed away. And he cried. They were so close. Such good friends.

I remember telling him that Luke wasn’t sick anymore. And that he was with God and God was with him. And after a bit, he stopped crying. And he said, “Luke isn’t sick anymore? And he’s in heaven with God? That makes me feel better.”

When I was at the monastery on retreat a little later that summer, I bought a little wooden box one of the monks had made. It was a prayer box. There were words carved in the top. It said, “**Trust the Lord with all your heart.**” And I gave it to Patrick and told him that when he was worried about something, or if there was someone he wanted to pray for, he could write it down on a piece of paper and put it in the box and say a prayer. And it would be like giving his worries and prayers to God.

A few weeks later, there were several deaths... in our family and in the church. And there were people in the hospital and people hurting. And it was a strange and difficult time. And I was sitting in a chair at the parsonage one evening, and Patrick came in holding the prayer box. He said, “I want to show you something, Dad.” And he took the lid off and held the box out for me to see. And there was a black tie -- a black necktie -- inside. And he said, “Black stands for sickness and worry and death and

all the bad things that happen to people. And that's what I'm giving to God. I'm putting all of that in the box."

So, you see... he was my counselor, my encourager, my mentor in those days. Because he reminded me in the most wonderful way that I wasn't alone. That God was there with me ... and that God understood and God cared and that God was someone we could trust. ✕

It reminds me of a little girl who came home late for supper, one day. Her mother was not happy. So she asked the child where "on earth" she had been. And the little girl told her that she had stopped to help Janie, her friend, because she had wrecked her bicycle and it was broken and she didn't know how to fix it.

"But you don't know anything about fixing bicycles," said her mom.

And the little girl said, "I know... I just stopped to help her cry."