

Through THE WINDOW

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Dear GPC Members and Friends,

The months of May and June contain two “holidays” that our culture celebrates with great enthusiasm: Mothers’ Day and Fathers’ Day. The stores will be filled with cards and flowers, and many gifts will exchange hands as a way of expressing love between parents and children. How good it is for us to celebrate familial love! God gives us our relationships, and they are part of God’s good will for creation. I will gladly give and receive those cards and presents over the next two months.

As I grow older, however, I have come to appreciate how difficult these two days are for many people, myself included, for many reasons. In my own life and through many conversations with church members, I have discovered how many exceptions to the rule there are within every family. In other words, in contrast to the happy relationships we will see in various media as May and June approach, there are many child-parent relationships that are strained, at best, and downright hostile, at worst. Every family bears marks of pain by wounds caused by harsh words, wrong actions, and long-held disagreements – many times from decades ago.

My own family’s life bears many of those painful marks, going back to the early 1970’s. My father and mother divorced when I was two years old, and my father retained custody of my two brothers and me. My biological mother had an off-and-on-again relationship with her sons -- more off than on. For reasons that have always been a mystery, she chose to have less and less to do with her children and family over the years. Growing up, we would see her a few times a year, maybe, and the contact was negligible over the last twenty-five years.

We have never known truly why she abandoned the relationships that most of us take for granted. Perhaps there was mental illness involved; perhaps some other factor like grief; or selfishness; or who knows what. We do not know the causes; we know only the effects: an estranged, reclusive life of isolation and poverty many miles away from those who would have done more if they were allowed. She died alone last spring in the early hours of Easter morning 2017 in East Tennessee. I did not spread this news widely among our church, especially on that morning (Easter) when so many people are joyful and happy. People who knew her decades ago remember her as a vibrant young woman who grew up happy and who went to Ole Miss and had a bright future ahead – until her problems and poor choices compounded and derailed her life.

So, how do you celebrate Mother’s Day when you have such mixed and negative experiences like mine? I am so grateful to have had a step-mother step into my life and provide so many maternal blessings. I am also married to one of the best mothers I have ever known. So, yes, there are good blessings to celebrate. And yet, my experience and so many of yours high-

light the hardship that many mothers and fathers and children have on these two days of the year.

Over the years of my estranged relationship with my biological mother, I always kept the words of Exodus 20:12 in the front of my mind: “Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.” This command is just as relevant for adult children as it is for young children – probably even more so. The command to honor parents was given to us by God not only for our younger years when we are dependent on our parents but also when we are older. How do we honor our parents as they become more dependent on their children for care and provision? I would constantly ask myself what this command meant for me – in circumstances where there was no joy and little contact.

For me, the way to honor my mother was to ensure that she had enough of life’s basic necessities over the years. For a number of years after my father’s death, my mother’s sister managed the fund that provided my mother with a small, monthly stipend for rent and food. When that fund dried up, my brothers and I pooled some of our resources to ensure that her basic needs were met, plus a little more on occasion for medical care. It was the best way that we found to honor her in her last years when she was either not capable or not desirous of a normal relationship.

As these two cultural “holidays” approach in May and June, may we celebrate the goodness of the mother and father relationships that God has provided in our lives. They are part of God’s created order for human life, and we cherish those relationships when they are healthy. May we also remember, however, that each life (and each relationship) is marred by sin, mistakes, and heartache. We pray for reconciliation between parents and children who are estranged. We know that even painful relationships exist under God’s command to honor one another, even if expressions of love are muted and hard. May God bless our relationships and inspire us to be the best children and parents we can be.

Grace, mercy, and peace,

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