

A Wife's Perspective

By Cathie Van Domelen

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“His mother, meanwhile, kept all these things in memory.” Luke 2:51b

What I am about to share with you I have “kept in memory” for about 20 years. But, unlike those wonderful things kept by Mary, the Blessed Mother of Jesus, my memory held things of sorrow and shame.

On April 3, 1985, my husband Bob was arrested for child molestation. Thus began a journey for him, for me, and for our families which continues today. About those early days in the journey, people ask me, “How did you do it?” My answer is usually, “I just did it.” But here I am forced to unwrap for you the layers of protection and strength which God allowed in me so that I would be prepared for that day in 1985.

At the heart of my strength and protection was a solid base of Christian values imbued in me since birth. My father was a man of honor who strove to do and be the best of what was expected of him and presented to him in life. My mother was a font of folksy wisdom inherited, I am sure, from her mother and hers before, etc. You know these motherly aphorisms-- “Every cloud has a silver lining,”-- “Nothing happens but what some good comes of it,” and the one that carried me through those dark days and many before and since: “The Lord never gives you a bigger cross than He gives you the shoulders to bear it.”

That particular wise saying, I discovered a few years ago, has a Biblical base which I'm sure was listed by the maternal generations. It was Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians who said, “No test has been sent to you that does not come to all men. Besides, God keeps His promise. He will not let you be tested beyond your strength. Along with the test He will give you a way out of it so that you may be able to endure it.” 1Cor. 10:13

And so I just did it. I was a wife. I had taken a vow to love, honor and respect...for better, for worse, etc. This too was part of my very being—the honoring of vows.

And, of course, Dear Abby/Ann Landers echoed in the recesses of my mind with the question, “Am I better off with or without him?” and conversely, “Is he better off with or without us?” In other words, what benefit would I or would Bob derive from divorce? And, what harm to me or to him if we divorced?

Also, I was a mother and still am. How could our three, then minor, children be better off? What scenario would hurt them? Which scenario would benefit them or do the least harm?

Finally, I had to ask myself about Bob, “Is this a man who is worth standing by? Does he have redeeming qualities? Is there anything in him that we want to remain in our lives?” In other words, “Is this a GOOD MAN who has done some really terrible things?” My answer to all these questions was yes.

Ultimately, I accepted the fact that God had forgiven Bob. And if God had forgiven him, who was I not to do likewise. Do we not pray daily as taught by Jesus Christ, “Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive those who wrong us” Mt.6:12? And Jesus, a good Jewish man of His times would have known of the Wisdom of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)28:2. “Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.” I knew that Bob's sins were most grievous and beyond what I could imagine or had ever done. But I also knew (and know) that all sin, mine included, is distressing to God, our heavenly Father. And all sin represents a turning away from Him and His infinite love.

So I just did it. I had a responsibility to our children as well as to my husband. What would it benefit any of us if I turned and ran? So I stayed. I did not entertain any other options. And I placed it all in the hands of God.

When our daughter, our third child, had been born, I had felt overwhelmed so I had leaned on God. Heavily! I played to Him; I yelled at Him; I pretty much ordered Him to help me. And He did. So eleven years later when I was thrown this curve by my husband's actions, I knew right where to go. No yelling this time, just praying and acceding to His will.

Reading through Psalms during those early days after Bob's arrest, I came upon the one which I turned to regularly, especially certain verses: Lord, "Show me the way in which I should walk, for to you I lift up my soul....Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. May your good spirit guide me on level ground. For your name's sake, O Lord, preserve me; in your justice free me from distress." Psalm 143:8b,10-11.

I was learning that to sustain my family, I needed to turn to Him so that He could reshape me into His image, to make me more surely His child.

When I bought the children home from the Police station the evening of April 5, 1985, I stood in the kitchen of our home with my back to the sink facing them and told them that their father had done some bad things and he would have to pay for them. I also told them that they, and I, had done nothing wrong. We were blameless, innocent of any crime which he had committed. Furthermore, anyone who tried to accuse us should be told that, in no uncertain terms.

Jesus knew that the sins of the parents do not settle on the children. The Mosaic laws of justice put forth in Deuteronomy and echoed in Kings and Chronicles remind us that 'parents and children shall not pay the each others' sins. "Only for his own guilt shall a man be punished." Deut.24:16

In the weeks and months that were to follow, we carried on with our lives while trying to remain out of the public eye. The children, in grades 5,7, and 9, went to school and did their best. Several families included them in activities and outings, especially our daughter, the youngest and least understanding of what was going on. The boys did their paper routes and went to church with me. Bob was too ashamed to attend services at our neighborhood church so he and I went to services in a nearby town. Sometimes the children joined us, but usually not. The people at the other church were friendly and accepting of us, but, of course, they didn't *know*.

In the 20 years since Bob's arrest and imprisonment, we have tried to return to active membership in our neighborhood church only to be rebuffed several times. But we do not stop attending liturgy there. We know that community is important—where two or more are gathered, if you will. We know that God is there for us and we feel the need to give witness to His working in our lives by remaining in the church community where we were married, and where our children were baptized and confirmed, and where our daughter and son-in-law were married. We strive to be with God wherever we are, wherever He is, regardless of the acceptance of others. We must lean on Him alone. This may not sound easy but, frankly, it's not so hard when it's the only viable option!

Today my husband is a most Godly man. Those who would see him only as the person he was 20 years ago, who would keep him in the prison he was in 15 years ago, are denying him the forgiveness available to all of us who accept Jesus as Savior and who work daily to walk in His way. They are also denying God His loving choice to forgive.

Cathie continues to support her husband, Bob, and has begun sharing in appropriate settings. Wives of sex offenders face tremendous difficulties and often are as rejected as their husbands are. This rejection is not merely at the hands of neighbors and communities but by churches as well. Cathie will be the first to tell other in a similar situation that there is no "one size fits all" solution, but she will also affirm that whatever happens, God must be in the picture.

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