

## **“Imperfect Families”**

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**Vanessa R. Southern, preaching**

### **Reading: Naked by David Sedaris**

It wasn't that we were poor. According to my parents, we were far from it, just not far enough from it to meet my needs. I wanted a home with a moat rather than a fence. In order to get a decent night's sleep, I needed an airport named in our honor.

“You're a snob,” my mother would say. “That's your problem in a hard little nutshell....”

No matter what we had – the house, the cars, the vacations – it was never enough. Somewhere along the line a terrible mistake had been made. The life I'd been offered was completely unacceptable, but I never gave up hope that my real family might arrive at any moment, pressing the doorbell with their white-gloved fingers. “Oh, Lord Chiselchin,” they'd cry, tossing their top hats in celebration, “thank God we've finally found you.”

“It ain't going to happen,” my mother said. “Believe me, if I was going to steal a baby, I would have taken one that didn't bust my [bottom] every time I left my coat lying on the sofa. I don't know how it happened, but you're mine. If that's a big disappointment for you, just imagine what *I* must feel.”

### **Sermon**

Which of us hasn't wondered, or hoped, at some point that he or she had been born into the wrong family? Which of us hasn't dreamed at least once of being adopted into some clan a little less weird or disappointing than our own? For David Sedaris, the writer, the feeling was so persistent that he admits trying to make the familial switch happen on his own. And the whole farce wasn't lost on his pretty game mother. Sedaris writes:

“While my mother grocery-shopped, I would often loiter near the front of the store. It was my hope that some wealthy couple might stuff me into the trunk of their car,” taking me into their family as their own.

“Any takers?” my mother would ask, wheeling her loaded grocery cart out into the parking lot.

“Don't you know any childless couples,” I'd ask.

“Someone with a pool or a private jet?”

“If I did, [she'd say] you'd be the first one to know.”

Somewhere along the line there is that day in anyone's life when he or she comes to feel that there are norms in the world, and his or her family falls well outside those norms in certain key dimensions. There came that fateful day when we noticed our mother was a little less fashionable than others or a little too flamboyant; when it became clear that other dads were so much more commanding in the world or so much more engaged with their sons.

I remember when I realized how much more fun other families seemed to have. It was Trish's family that brought it home. Her handsome dad seemed to think life was a party and as proof he brought home a Carvel ice cream cake for any occasion, even holidays I didn't know you could celebrate. I learned to time my visits to coincide with any day off from school to capitalize on the cakes. And with two older brothers in the house, there was no end to mischief in her household. As an only child in a family that still believes that quiet time and reading are two of life's greatest pleasures, Trish's house was the yin to my yang and I thought it was bliss. "This is life!" I thought to myself and when I inevitably returned home after a sleepover or play date at her house, things in my own always seemed a bit lifeless by comparison.

So on some fateful day the curtain was pulled back and our families were revealed to fall short, in both superficial and often in some serious ways too. Some homes were safer than ours, we saw. Some parents didn't pass out drunk on the couch or hit out of anger, or yell awful things we hoped they didn't mean. Some parents protected their children from life's pain better than ours did.

Probably, all of us found that our families were flawed in a complicated mix of some important and some simply irritating or embarrassing ways. When we discovered this was probably around the time we made our mom drop us off a block away from school and tried to make clear in public that we weren't really *with* her. We hoped desperately this would help us fight off the disease of their imperfections, lest it be transmittable.

Why I mention it is because I realize that in a couple of days many of us will travel or have others travel from distant and nearby places to be together with members of these families. Even those of us who will have little family around us this Thanksgiving will have the memories of our family life stirred up like a plow that returns this season every year digging into to old emotional ground one more time. And so it seemed fitting to pay homage to imperfect families this morning and the challenge of what we do with this piece of life's offering to us.

This summer I read The Glass Castle, a kind of family memoir written by writer Jeanette Walls. Hers is a case study of an imperfect family. The book draws you brilliantly into one of the most idiosyncratic, delightful, frustrating and painful clans. Walls' parents are two free spirits – the ever entrepreneurial chaser-of-rainbows father and the mother who was determined to live into her artistic drive for self-expression. Their pursuits take them on a perpetual life road trip from state to state staying in each place only as long as their luck and credit holds out or until wanderlust draws them after some other elusive Eden.

Walls parents take their children on this wild ride often ignoring the practical requirements of life, leaving their children to function as children ought not have to. The book opens, in fact, with Walls' early memory of cooking in a frilly dress and watching the dress catching fire. She is three years old. She remembers the time in the hospital, the burns and skin grafts, the appalled reaction of the nurses and her father's late night kidnapping of her, ostensibly to free his daughter from this oppressive situation, but really to outrun the hospital bill he could not pay. "A few days after Mom

and Dad brought me home,” she writes, “I cooked myself some hot dogs. I was hungry, Mom was working on a painting, and no one else was there to fix them for me. ‘Good for you,’ Mom said when she saw me cooking. ‘You’ve got to get right back in the saddle. You can’t live in fear of something as basic as fire.’”

If “life threatening” doesn’t make a strong enough case for the title of imperfect parent, how about mortifiably embarrassing. Take, for instance, Wall’s dad. He was forced by her mother to go to church as a condition of parenting, but as a man of reason and science it was a tormenting experience for him. So, each Sunday’s he attended church he battled the demon of disagreement until, inevitably, each time he would rise up from his seat and not leave the church, but,

...he’d shout out something to challenge the priest...He wasn’t hostile. “Yo, Padre!” he’d say. The priest usually ignored Dad and tried to go on with his sermon, but Dad persisted. He challenge the priest about the scientific impossibility of the miracles, and when the priest continued to ignore him, he’d get mad and yell out something about Pope Alexander VI’s bastard children, or Pope Leo X’s hedonism, or Pope Nicholas III’s simony, or the murders committed in the name of the Church during the Spanish Inquisition... At that point the ushers would tell us we’d have to leave.

“Don’t worry, God understands,” Mom said. “He knows that your father is a cross we must bear.”

Both of Walls’ parents are a kind of cross she must bear. However, in her story there is not only the pain of being raised by two parents who seems unable to care for and protect their children but also the reality of their quirky and loveable fearlessness and a remarkable authenticity too. “Mom and Dad liked to make a big point about never surrendering to fear or to prejudice or to the narrow-minded conformist stick-in-the-mud who tried to tell everyone else what was proper. We were supposed to ignore those benighted sheep, as Dad called them.” Her take on her parents makes for a kind of ambivalence in the reader, which I think is an honest feeling most of us go through with our families, and maybe some of us still wrestle with.

Even the best of families have ways they could have been more loving, given more of what we in our particular unfolding needed, gifts that they may not have known how to give. And even the worst have gifts to offer.

David Sedaris in [Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim](#) has a vignette about his wildly eccentric younger brother that wonders what this brother’s daughter will one day see in her father – the awkward places or the beauty and devotion that is painfully sweet. He writes it as his family nervously watches this brother become a father. This was the brother who decorated his house with musical butcher knives and other practical jokes and who once rooted through the garbage to retrieve some chicken that he had deemed rotten the night before but this night, hungry, he searches for to give another try. *This* man had become a father!

When the child is born by cesarean and with complications David’s brother is the one forced to care for the child until the mother heals. This crazy brother, is also

the man, however, who filled the house with toys and Baby Einstein videos and crib the week he found out he and his wife were pregnant. Now, he stays up each night with the infant, carrying a pillow with him wherever he goes so he can sleep beside her, calling David to talk about this miracle child as he himself sleeps on the floor beneath her crib so he'll be close when she wakes. Sedaris' writes: "I look into the future and see my brother's face, impossibly middle-aged. His daughter has rejected all of his values and stands now on the dais of a major university, the valedictorian preparing to deliver her commencement speech. What will she think when her dad stands in the aisle, releasing a hog call and raising his T-shirt to reveal the jiggling message painted upon his bare stomach? Will she turn away, as my father predicts, or might she remember all the nights she awoke to discover him: this slob, this lump, this silly drooling toy asleep at her feet."

I wonder sometimes what we see. And I worry about the danger that what we see and feel so clearly, even now, is more the embarrassing father, or deficient sister, or withdrawn mother and not the good that lies in our story and theirs too.

Jeanette Walls' and her siblings came to understand their father more fully when they met his parents. It turned out these were not like the refined grandparents on her mother's side. The folks who greeted her at the door of a worn house in Welch, West Virginia was a mumbling grandfather missing his teeth, a stiff and unwelcoming grandmother, and the most welcoming of all was the uncle who smelled of whiskey and hugged a bit too long. Indeed, when Walls first meets them she thinks it is a joke and her father will laugh in a moment and then take her down the road to another family, one with teeth, and social graces. But, her dad never laughs. Then, one night while staying with them, she sees her brother being inappropriately touched by her grandmother. Without hesitation she and her sisters step in. They challenge the matriarch and rescue her brother without hesitation.

In that moment, they come understand and forgive to some degree their father's drinking and his anger and his alienation from his family. Even as children they see that their dad has used imperfect means to spare them a more painful demon that he battles hard to keep inside. They see how he helped them internalize strong boundaries that he had to have spent a lifetime rebuilding for himself.

Look at anyone long enough, look behind annoyance and disappointment, and often something remarkable happens. You see the good you went looking for. Imperfection gets revealed as scars of other pain or even, perhaps, badges of courageous living in response to life's own imperfection.

For me, practicing this way of seeing people, meant the man who regularly sabotaged the community's growth, one day I saw differently as a man who feared a world that someday might have no place for him, so he wanted to keep his church that place. The woman who circled every spelling mistake in the newsletter, I came to see as a woman who'd spent a lifetime second guessing herself with a self-consciousness that was nearly crippling. And the aunt who had pulled away had done so, I came to see, out of love for the uncle she'd divorced and needed me to tend to so she could let him go.

Seeing the world this way also cleared the way for me to be able to see what had been hiding in the big shadows their imperfections had cast for me. Out of the shadows

came a sense of humor I never before could hear over my irritation. Out of the shadows came the generosity of spirit I had seen instead as something else. Out of the shadows came the lesson from my aunt about what love sometimes demands of us.

Jeanne Walls begins her book with a similar and remarkable acknowledgement. She writes of the mother who sent her back to the stove to cook with burns still wrapped in bandages, and the alcoholic father who never provided a steady and safe home for them because he had some new dream to chase, of her gratitude for them both. "I'm ... grateful to my mother for believing in art and truth and for supporting the idea of the book... And to my father, Rex S. Walls, for dreaming all those big dreams." She writes this in her dedication of the book and she means it.

I suppose this would be an ideal: to be able to let go of the ugly and appreciate with a full heart the good; To live in gratitude and understanding rather than caught up in the regret about our familial lot that gripped us so long ago we dreamed of kidnappings and adoption. For what it is worth I got one little additional clue from the universe this last week about how to see the blessings of our imperfect families. It came in the form of a fortune cookie fortune and it said: "A smooth sea never made a skillful mariner!"

In other words, perfection makes for a poor teacher in life. And more honestly no such perfect family existed just like no sailor ever sailed a lifetime of halcyon days. So, lucky for David Sedaris and us, that we weren't kidnapped by the perfect family outside Shoprite. Sedaris wouldn't have had any salty tales to tell and neither would we. Neither of us would have developed sea legs worthy of a life of adventure.

I wish us all strength and calm and insight during these Thanksgiving Holidays and I wish us eyes that can see the layers of human experience, the courage behind the scars, the blessings in the shadows of imperfection, a family we can love and come to love more and more as grace and hard spiritually disciplined work allow.

Amen.