

AND DO NOT TURN YOUR BACK ON YOUR OWN

It was the fall of 2002 and I had just received word that a former lay colleague of mine had died. I could not attend his funeral but went to the viewing the night before. He was very well known in the arena of Catholic Education and there were many people at the viewing. In addition he had a large family. We worked together for six years in the Office of Catholic Education. For three years we were peers although he was a generation older than I and actually helped me adjust to life in central Church administration. For the last three years together I was his boss. In the course of those years I was told that it was time for house cleaning and there were reasons why this was necessary. This gentleman was demoted rather than completely let go. This demotion also impacted his finances which in turn influenced his pension. While not agreeing with what was happening he understood and as far as I know held no rancor toward me. We left on good terms. I left the Office in 1991. He died in 2002.

As I approached his family members I introduced myself to his sons and daughters. His wife I already knew. Standing beside his wife was one daughter who, when I told her who I was, scowled at me, pulled her hand back from mine and turned her back on me.irate. Angry. Fuming. I was very embarrassed and very much at a loss as to what to do and very much surprised at her reaction. I stepped to her mother who was cordial but awkward. I am guessing that this daughter held me responsible for what she considered shabby treatment toward her father and even though it was a dozen years she had most definitely not forgotten and most definitely not forgiven.

I don't believe I have ever had another person turn his or her back on me before. It was a moment I have not forgotten. In the section today from Isaiah the prophet is a very simple sentence: "Do not turn your back on your own." There is no way that I would qualify as being part of that woman's "own." But the reason that the sentence is in the prophet's words is because we human beings do sometimes turn our backs on our own. I have seen it. You have seen it. I have seen children abandon their parents. Never visit. Never care. But show up for the reading of the will. I have seen parents turn their backs on their children, giving up in exasperation because of the failures, deceptions, manipulations, broken promises and selfishness. Enough is enough. That is what is said. I have had it! That's it! No more.

And then. Well, then I just decide not to have anything to do with that person any more. Maybe no contact. Surely not any cordial relationship. Sometimes that person is no longer welcome in my home. We speak about breaking points and going too far. But here is what I know. In my relationship with my God I have done a lot of bad things, selfish things, unthinking things, careless things. I have acted in very self-serving ways and often expected a free pass from God. When I finally came to my senses I apologized. I asked forgiveness. I confessed my sins. I said I was sorry. And this is what I know. The Lord took me back. Each time. Every time. Even when I fell again and again. Even when I promised and broke my promise. The Lord took me back. The Lord never turned his back on me. Never. Not once.

And I know now that He never will. It is not who He is. He is the faithful one. And his faithfulness makes all the difference in the world. It certainly has made all the difference in my life enabling me to finally come to my senses. What if the Lord had given up on me? Cut me off? Turned his back on me? What would I have done? What could I do? I could never make up for what I had done or what I had failed to do. He is my hope. He alone.

Maybe that is why the Lord spoke what He did through the prophet Isaiah those many years ago. "Do not turn your back on your own." Now you might be thinking: And who is my own?" Makes sense but it's the wrong question. It is a question that seeks an answer that will allow me to turn my back on at least some people, those who are not "my own." It's like the "Who is my neighbor?" question. It is the wrong question. The right question is this: Lord you have been so good to me so many times even in my stubbornness and intransigence. What do you want me to do in this relationship, with this person? Lord what would you have me do? Why, Stephen, be for them as I have been for you. Put aside their sins and become salt for them and light. You really are the salt of the earth. You really are the light of the world. If not you? Who?

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.