

Cousins

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I recently spent a few days with some of my cousins on my mother's side. Our families share land that is dear to all of us, and once a year we meet there to do some business and have a picnic and get caught up.

I never lived near any of my cousins; the closest was when three of us lived in a hour's triangle from each other, and mostly we got together for Thanksgiving a few times. Cousins were never part of my everyday life. But they were a part of my summers, as we would fly or drive from all over the country to meet at the family place near Mt. Rainier, to be loved by our grandparents, to throw rocks in the creek when we were little and to build dams in the creek when we got older.

Now that we are all older, I have a different appreciation for my cousins. We're in various stages of child-rearing. A few are grandparents, while the youngest child of our children's generation is just four. We've had successes and less so of careers and marriages and managing it all. The oldest of our generation died 40 years ago, and I hardly knew him.

My cousins came to mind earlier this month when I went to Lake Tahoe to be the worship leader at a conference for church music leaders. Needless to say, it's a good gig. Lake Tahoe. Gorgeous choral music all day long. Leading in worship, which is one of my favorite things. Lake Tahoe. Our church's music director was there too, one of four music directors who each brought two pieces for the concert we had the last night

One of the pieces she chose is a favorite of our choir and of mine: *Entreat Me Not to Leave You*, by Dan Forrest. It's based on the text from the book of Ruth, when Ruth says to her mother-in-law Naomi, after both have been widowed,

Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!

The piece begins with a pattern of voices singing the words “entreat me not to leave you,” building to this anguished plea that ends when the altos come in with one note that stops the anguish. And then, like leaving a dense forest to walk into an open meadow, come those words: “For where you go, I will go; And where you live, I will live...”

I was sitting in on a rehearsal, listening to the choir learn this piece, when I started thinking about my cousins and my siblings and me and our parents. Because that’s the other thing we’re doing now: watching our parents age. I don’t really like this, but I’m not in it alone. Some of our parents, these siblings five, are doing well, and some are slowing down. The hearing isn’t what it used to be; neither are the joints. There’s been more talk of “after I’m gone, this will be yours to take care of.”

So when my cousins and siblings and I get together, we don’t throw rocks in the creek anymore. Our kids build the dams. But we sit by the creek, sometimes with our parents, with our aunts and uncles, because we know this time is precious and will not last forever. We’re all the more mindful of that now.

And I think about the commitment our parents made to their spouses, and in a way to us their children, and the commitment we now make to them: where you go, I will go; and where you live, I will live. We can’t always fulfill that promise, but more true are the words that begin and end the song: Entreat me not to leave you. I am not ready to let you go, not to follow you, not to live near you or even visit you. I am not ready for death to part us.

So, cousins, here we are. I am grateful for you, and I have your back whatever will come.

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