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Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field

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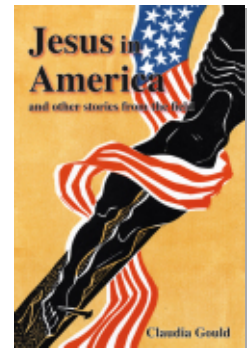
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A Red Crayon

*Their children, which have not known any thing, may hear
and learn to fear the Lord.*

—Deuteronomy 31:13

Well, my brother-in-law was sayin' how you have to teach the young-uns to behave, and I think he's right. Well, I know he is, up to a point. You can't leave 'em to run wild. That's not doing them a favor.

But I know how he teaches his kids. Ooh, don't you think he tears them up! Now, I'm not one of these people who thinks you mustn't lay a hand on a child—your own child, I mean—I think I'd kill anybody else who hit a kid of mine. These people who say you mustn't spank a kid, well, mostly they don't have any kids of their own, do they? They're just some kind of college graduate. My grandmother used to say there's some things you can't learn out of books, and raisin' kids is surely one of 'em.

No, it's true, they have to learn. I don't hold with everything in the Bible, but "the rod and reproof give wisdom," is about right. You know, when it says "rod," it sounds bad, but I expect it only means a switch. But you know how it goes on about how a child left to himself brings shame to his mother, and I think that's true. Well, you can't expect a child to raise itself. But Martin—my brother-in-law Martin—he goes too far sometimes, I think. Well, to tell you the truth, I know for a fact he does. Of course I'd never say so. My sister is the one to say that to him, not me, but you know she never will. It's my opinion that she doesn't exactly agree with him, but—it's hard to know how to say this right—she's not so sure he's wrong that she feels right interfering. He is the head of the house. And you can't show them that Mom and Dad don't agree, can you? You have to have a united front. They'll just play one off against the other if you don't. But I've been there while my sister Annie was just cryin' her eyes out, listening to him givin' that little boy a whuppin'. She'd flinch ever'time she heard that belt hit just as

if it was landin' on her. But she never said a word to him when he came out. Just went and took care of Daniel. I wished I wasn't there, 'cause Martin and me was together in that front room. Not a sound, except for that child cryin'—he's only seven, no more than a baby—and him slidin' that ol' belt back through the loops of his pants, and I couldn't think of a word to say to him that wouldn't have been the start of a fight. I wouldn't 'a minded fightin' with him, but that would just about of tore Annie right up. She just hates it when folks fight. I don't mind it.

I'll tell you one thing, my mamma don't like the way he does. One time she said to my sister, "Annie, hasn't that husband of yours ever heard 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord?'" And I thought that was about right, since he's so big on the Bible. But you know, then I started to think that might be worse. The Lord's vengeance. You know, when you were little and you did some mischief, and your grandma or whoever was mindin' you might say, just you wait 'til your daddy gets home and I tell him what you've done. Well, don't it just spoil your whole day waiting? I think if you're waitin' for God to get home and whup you, it about spoils your whole life. Mind, I guess that's what the churches teach. So now you see. I'm not a real Christian. I believe in Jesus and the love of God, but I just haven't found a church that doesn't try to get people to behave by scarin' 'em to death. And that's the truth.

I'll just tell you a story. Years ago, when we lived in Bethesda Community—it was a real little place, then, just a few houses and the post office and some gas pumps and this little frame church; of course, now it's a lot bigger—got a supermarket and a garage and I don't know what all. But in those days my mama had to come right in to Drexel to go to work. She was a religious woman—she still is—and she used to haul us to church ever' Sunday, rain or shine, and we'd go to Sunday School and then we'd have to sit through the worship service with her and Daddy, my brother Sam and I did. I was young enough I didn't mind it so much. Sometimes I'd fall asleep on Daddy's lap, and I guess Mama thought some of that goodness would sink in anyway.

Well, Sam and I weren't in the same class, cause he was that little bit older. We didn't have Annie yet. She wasn't born 'til after we moved into town. The class I was in, it was just like kindergarten really, only we colored in scenes from the Bible instead of—oh, you know, firemen and ducks on ponds. Ballet dancers. Well, this one day the teacher gave out these pictures. Now, looking back on

it, I suppose they were pretty much like all the other pictures, but they were meant to be stained glass windows. With those pointed tops, you know? And lines through ‘em, so it looked like the lead between the pieces of colored glass. I expect there was a Bible verse, but I don’t remember. I just thought they were just the most beautiful pictures. I wasn’t but tee-tiny. Mine was of the dove coming down to Jesus when he was standin’ in the river to be baptized so I had all that blue water and green trees I could do. I knew to leave Jesus’s robe the color of the paper, but I decided to make John the Baptist’s robe red, and I picked up this crayon and it came out just the most beautiful color. Just like wine—not that you’d think of that in a Baptist church, would you?—just like grape juice. I was wearin’ a little summer dress that my mom made me, with puffed pockets sewn on the front both sides, and I just dropped that crayon in my pocket. I never did work out why I did that; it just seemed to find its own way in there. It seems like it was the color I wanted to keep. But once I put it in, it never seemed the right time to take it out.

Well, after a while I got time to sit on the rug for our Bible story, and I can’t even remember what the story was, but I do remember that the teacher told us about the Ten Commandments, so maybe it was the golden calf one. Then she told us about hell—the ever-burning fire, and the dark smoke smelling of sulphur. Oh, I tell you, she was a one for paintin’ a picture. She spoke so clear I tell you I could just feel the heat comin’ off that lake of burnin’ brimstone. And it wasn’t only me, either. Even the big boys—well, I say big, of course all of us wasn’t nothin’ but babies, but they seemed big to me; you know how much there is between four and four and a half when you’re that age—even the big boys was listenin’ with big eyes, and there was just one big shudder through us all when she said how we’d hear the big iron door to heaven bang shut over our heads never to be opened again forever and ever. Oh, she could tell a tale, all right.

So then she got back to the Ten Commandments. Or that’s how I remember it. Now, she might have talked about all of ‘em, but I don’t suppose she did. We were too little to know what most of ‘em meant, after all. But she talked about honoring my father and my mother—I just made up my mind not to sass back—and then about lyin’ (I guess it must a’ been false witness, now that I think about it), and I thought, well, I won’t ever do that. But stealing. She said, “Now children, you must promise me and promise the Lord Jesus that you will never steal, because that’s about the lowest

thing a person could do.” And everybody said, “I promise!” except for me. And I couldn’t say it. It was like that red crayon was stuck in my throat like to choke me if I tried. And I felt as if ever’body could hear me bein’ quiet. Really, I don’t suppose anybody noticed. I mean, now I think about it all these years gone by, a roomful of toddlers—we were hardly any more than that—would shout out just about anything you tell ‘em, just to join in with the noise, and if there’s one who doesn’t—well, it doesn’t mean anything. She could just have lost interest. Oh, but I hadn’t lost interest. I was plotting how I could get that red crayon back in its box and save my poor soul. The trouble was that the play equipment was all put away by then, in cupboards. I didn’t even know which cupboard the crayons went in, but I had a awful feelin’ it was gonna be one that was too high for me to reach. I could have left it just layin’ on the table, but you know, I couldn’t make up my mind to do that. I remember it just as clear. It seemed like I wouldn’t have undone the stealing unless I got it right back where it was supposed to be. You know these ideas that children get... I went and pulled a chair over to one of them big cabinets and started to climb up on it—I guess I thought I was gonna try ‘em all—and of course Miss Harben came over and lifted me down and said, now Peggy Mae, what are you tryin’ to do? And she laughed and put me on my feet and put the chair back under the table. The parents had started to come in to pick up their children and she shook her head and said, you never know what they’ll do next, do you? So everybody shook their heads and said you sure don’t, and my mama and daddy were there for me and that was the end of it. I went off out of that little church with that crayon in my pocket and I want to tell you I never carried anything so heavy in my life, before or since. All the way back to the car, my brother was caperin’ down the road and tryin’ to get me to race him—cause he would always win, but I used to run against him ever’time. I think I thought I’d catch up with him one day and not be the youngest any more. But not this time. This day I wouldn’t do a thing. Just plodded along ‘til I got lifted into our big ol’ Dodge and set off to home. And I heard my mama say, she’s tired, and I felt like the biggest sinner in the world. Here she was feelin’ sorry for me and I didn’t deserve it a bit.

But I guess she must a’ been right about me bein’ tired, because I know for a fact that I slept all night that night, even though I was afraid to say my prayers. No, it was the next night I woke up with a nightmare. You know, to this day I can’t remember what it was,

but Mama told me I was screamin' like a crazy thing, and when she came into our room, I kept lookin' over her shoulder with my eyes so wide and scared that she couldn't help lookin' behind her, scared she'd see what I saw, even though she knew better.

Well, it took a week of nightmares before she got it out of me. Every night I was awake—or halfway awake and halfway still in my bad dream—and she told me—oh, this would a' been years later—that she thought there was getting to be something wrong with my mind. I never remembered the dreams, or even if they were different or always the same one, but I know I always woke up with the same bad feeling. Sick and scared.

I carried that crayon with me everywhere. I took it out of my dress pocket and put it in my sweater, and at night I'd put it under my pillow if my pj's didn't have a pocket. I don't know what I was thinkin', but I know I thought I had to have it by me. I must have left red smears on everything I wore, but Mama either didn't notice or she didn't think it was any one thing. Kids make enough mess, don't they?

One mornin' I couldn't find my pajamas when I went to get it out of the pocket, and I like to go crazy lookin' for it. Well, all that happened, of course, is my mama had put the washin' in first thing, and it went in with the dirty clothes. I've thought about this a lot, and I think I must ha' been ready to get caught, you know? Found out? Because I remember in the first days having that crayon in my fist while I was changin' clothes. I wouldn't leave it for a minute. I was gettin' careless, I guess. I can laugh about it now. It must a' been makin' me tired out, though. Really.

When she found it, when she was hangin' out the clothes, it was kind of deformed and squashed up, and she came in and asked me what it was. Well, of course that was it. I just sat down and howled. I'd tried to keep her from findin' out how bad I was and now she knew, and I know I was so sorry to let on but you know I must a' been kind of relieved at the same time. She just sat and listened to me. I think now it must have been a job to know what I was talkin' about, but she just let me keep on until she got it. She hugged me and kissed me and told me I was the best little girl in the world and not a sinner. And the next Sunday she took me to church and let me hand that damned crayon back. It must have been funny, you know, for everybody but me. Here was this poor old beat up crayon bein' handed over as if it was some kind of a prize, and me just in a tremble over it, and I expect Miss Harben didn't have the notion

of an idea what was goin' on. At first. Mother said that I carried the crayon home "by mistake" is what she said, and she said that I had been afraid all week that I was going to hell. "Oh, my," Miss Harben said, and she bent over to me. "Why, Jesus who loves all the little children wouldn't let that happen, would he?" And then she kind of laughed and straightened up and said to my mother, "But it's good to know she's learned right from wrong so young, isn't it?"

Then Miss Harben put the crayon in the box and gave me a little pat on my head, and said that we were fixin' to have a real good time that mornin' and my mother took me by the hand and said, "She will never come to this place again, nor me nor anybody who belongs to me. No place that frightens children is a place of religion." And out we walked.

We joined a Church of Christ after that. Mother couldn't have lived without some kind of religion. But once I grew up, I found out I could. Not without religion, maybe, but church. It seems to me they all preach the same thing: "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom."

Like my sister's little boy fears his daddy.