

What's the Matter?

Earlier this week, my wife, my mom and I went up into East Texas. This is one of the areas of our country that bears its own identity, much like the Ozarks of northern Arkansas, the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, or Southern Illinois. East Texas is the land of my paternal family. Not long after leaving Houston we soon began to see the Piney Woods and slightly rolling hills covered with emerald green grass. I knew I was near the land that welcomed my ancestors, the Wyatts, the McLendons, the Campbells and the Popes who settled this land after arriving here via covered wagons. We were on a mission to visit and re-decorate Dad's grave. While on the way up, I decided to call my dear cousin, Roy Pope, now a retired schoolteacher. His phone number was packed away and Mom said, "Johnny, let's call Royce Anne; she'll have Roy's number." Royce Anne is my father's first cousin. In our family, many of the kinfolk are called by their first and middle name or a nickname derivative of it like, Charles Wayne, Bobby Lynn, Roy Jackson. I was named Jonathan Franklin and Daddy called me Johnny Frank. Therefore, I wanted to call my cousin, Roy Jack. The inspiration for the Pastor's Word is the response I received from our cousin Royce Anne. When Royce Anne answered the phone, I said, "This is Johnny Pope, Julian's boy." She answered with, "Johnny! What's the matter?" I said, nothing was the matter; I was just calling to get Roy's number because we're coming to Daddy's grave. She sighed in relief saying, "I was just scared something had happened to Evelyn or one of the family members."

On the way home I was enjoying the slight kiss of autumn on the terrain and remembered our last Thanksgiving with Dad in East Texas. We had gone to the grave of my great-grandfather, George Wyatt who walked with a limp from the wounds received as a Confederate during the War Between the States. Barbara had taken pictures of my oldest son, myself, and Grandpa Pope overlooking the grave of my great-grandfather, five generations in all. We viewed the vast expanse of land now covered with gas wells, that my grandfather, Alonzo L. Pope owned but had to sell for far less than it was worth during the depression. We have pictures of Dad and me with a beautiful background of fall foliage behind us. As my mind goes back to the days of my youth surrounded by a plentiful supply of uncles, aunts, a loving grandmother and a never-ending group of cousins, a melancholy slips over me. I see the sights: a kind of pecking order, the kids in the yard, the ladies in the kitchen and dining room, the old patriarchs gathered beneath a tree exchanging stories of war in our family from the Civil War until World War II in hushed tones that created a mystery in youthful hearts. I hear the sounds: the whoops of glee as I knock one of my larger cousins off balance with the pair of boxing gloves I am wearing. The slap of the leather as he gets a rebounding blow back. The laughter of the ladies coming from the house. And maybe best of all, the sound of Uncle Wyatt's banjo, Daddy's Gibson guitar and the inimitable sound of Dad singing, "All along the water tank, waiting for a train..." followed by the echo of his yodel that, for all the world, sounded like a train whistle - the likes of which I'll never hear again, Dad's voice or the actual whistle of an old train. The smells: the huge dinner, freshly mowed fields and the late evening breeze, wafting the sweet essence of honeysuckle. After dinner we gather together under the stars, deep in the heart of East Texas anyway, and the conversation gets more serious as we kids go off chasing the lightning bugs. We are called back after covering a few acres and the adults are preparing to retire for the night. Of course, the kids must be settled first. Since we were from out of town, we would find a pallet, neatly arranged and even though it was on the floor, we were most comfortable. We loved it and the spirit of adventure came over us as if we were the ancestors who first came to East Texas by covered wagon and we were not on the floors, but in our imagination we were sleeping out under the stars, wishing on every one. Our dominant wish was that we would all stay here forever and my brother, sister, Mom and Dad could linger right here with all our cousins, playing into the night and waking every morning to the smell of biscuits and gravy, and probably the best coffee this side of the Sabine River.

It didn't stay that way. We went back to the city and grew up. We went to college, got married and thankfully moved back to the state of my paternal heritage, but stayed in suburbia. The reunions continued on and then got less and less attended and I find it sad not remembering the last family reunion we attended. We still get together at funerals. The old timers that kept us together are off the scene.

After Aunt Nina, Dad's youngest sister died last year, there are no more siblings in that generation of my family. The oldest among us is W.A. Pope, that's Uncle Wallace's boy, who my grandmother affectionately called Poodle. Just before leaving Dad's grave I looked over at Uncle John Beauregard's grave, my Aunt Jewell Oline's grave and remembered their stories, but my generation are the only ones who know those stories - and not all of my generation know, because at the last funeral a couple of my cousins asked me to tell the family about the Popes, in other words who we are, where we came from, what we are about. The words of my dad's cousin haunt me now, "Johnny, what's the matter?" You see, it has been so long since I have called that they thought for me to be calling now means that it is only to relate bad news of a loved one by way of injury or recent medical challenge, or just thought I would tell you where and when the funeral for a loved one will be held. "What's the matter?" The matter is we need to stay connected to those we love. The matter is we need to call sometimes just to say, "I love you." The matter is we had better not forget the wars our loved ones fought in and why. The matter is we had better not forget to get that favorite recipe of chicken and dumplings and banana pudding before it dies with the best cooks America has ever seen. The matter is we need to be reminded of who we are, where we came from, and what we are all about. One reason we may not know where we are going is because we do not know the basic values, the "what really matters" in life. The matter is that those of us who hold the faith of our fathers had better never forget to pass it on to the next generation. That is what the matter is.

II Timothy 2:2 says, "*And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.*" Revelation 3:2 says, "*Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die...*" As I write these words, I am within just a few miles from where my Grandfather left this area near Nashville, Tennessee as a little boy in a covered wagon coming as many Tennesseans to Texas with his parents. I never met him; I counted on Dad to fill in the blanks of what I did not know about him. Recently I was talking to my youngest son, who recalls little or nothing about his grandfather. It has been up to me to fill in the blanks of his past to our kids. In ancient Ireland they called this communicator, the Seanchai: the storyteller. It was his duty to tell the old stories of bravery, love, war, and business. Today - don't wait until tomorrow - take the time to sit down and tell the old stories of our families and school them in the faith, the Word, and way of God as He dealt in time past and how He is willing to deal yet in the future with you and your kin. And that's the fact of the matter. "*Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein...*" (Jeremiah 6:16).

- Pastor Pope -

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