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**A New Year's Resolution: Being
Peculiar, Like My Father By James
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“What is your peculiarity?” In 1983, as I rode in the back seat of a car on the way to Golden, Colorado to attend the annual meeting of the Christian Ministries in the National Parks, this question was asked of an Assembly of God minister by Cotesworth Pinckney Lewis, Rector of Bruton Church at Williamsburg, Virginia from 1956 to 1985. The question was not asked with malice but it seemed challenging until the Assembly of God minister answered. He said, “We handle snakes!” As three of the car’s occupants doubled over with laughter, Cotesworth said, “Oh, really?” While we commonly use the word “peculiarity” as a synonym for “odd,” its primary meaning is “distinguishing characteristic.”

In 2004, as my father’s illness progressed, my brother and I sought the counsel of an attorney. In Natchitoches, Louisiana few things are not commonly known and almost everyone knows everyone. My father lived in Natchitoches from 1949 until his death October 7, 2005 and was well known. While talking to the attorney, he said, “Your father is a peculiar man.” I took offense to the comment and received a lesson in the preciseness of language. When I told the attorney that I was offended by his reference to my father as being peculiar, he said, “Well, let me see, maybe I chose the wrong word.” He then read from the dictionary, “peculiar – characteristic of only one person, distinctive, different from the usual, special.”

He smiled, as I did. I had been reminded of a very important lesson and I had learned a very important fact about my father. Other than the Bible, the most important book on my desk is the dictionary, which I consult to make certain that words which I commonly use are being used accurately and precisely. I had always used “peculiar” in its secondary sense as “odd or eccentric,” rather than its primary sense which, though it may have fallen into disuse, is nonetheless the precise meaning of the word. I thanked the kind lawyer for the lesson.

It is approaching two years since that conversation took place and it has been three months since my father’s death but I regularly think about the language lesson and almost as often of Cotesworth’s question. As I think of my father as a “peculiar man” -- “a special, one-of-a-kind, different-from-the-usual” kind of man -- I think, “What was his peculiarity?” The answers have surprised even me because I realize that my father was a man of contentment, of character, of commitment, of constant activity, of compassion, of confrontation and of the love for children.

As I have thought about my father, I cannot name one single thing that I know he ever wanted. That may be the most profound and peculiar thing about him. I cannot think of anything he ever expressed an interest in having or wanting. He was not passive, complacent or indifferent about life, but I don’t know a man who was ever more content.

The only time I ever remember him expressing an inability to afford anything was when I asked for something and he said, "We can't afford that." I later understood that it was not that we did not have the money but that it was not a wise idea to make the purchase. I learned there is a difference between having the money to buy something and making the choice to buy it.

I can never remember my father not having enough money. This was a man who worked for a salary all of his life and for many years earned what most would consider a meager wage. His lack of need of more money was not a function of the abundance of his money, but it was a function of my father's contentment, which was supported by my mother. He had everything a man could want: a family, a home and he had his work

Another peculiarity of my father was his character. My father was not only content, he was impeccably honest. There was a nobility about my father as his contentment and his character allowed him to interact with men far wealthier and far more notable without any sense of inferiority or intimidation. At his memorial service, I was able to say with honesty and integrity, "I do not know one shameful or indecent thing my father has very done." The more I reflect upon that comment, the more significant I realize that it is. My father's honesty was demonstrated in little ways. I early learned that if a man would not take a dime which didn't belong to him, you could trust him with a dollar. My father was greatly trusted by all that he knew as he had proved worthy of that trust at every opportunity. I do not that my father ever told a lie in his life.

My father's commitment was peculiar as well.. When my father gave his word, he kept it. He gave his word to my mother when he said, "I do," and all of his life "he did." When my father said that he would do something, you could check it off of your list as done because he was a man of his word. My father signed a few contracts during his life, but the majority of his life was sealed and lived with a handshake. He taught me that a man who did not keep his word was not a man. Even in the days of the "greatest generation" the total commitment to one's word was unique, special and unusual.

My father's commitment also reflected itself in the way he spent his time. Whether it was personal vacations with his family, 4-H Club work, Boy Scouts or Explorer scouts, my father was involved in everything his sons did. He tirelessly spent his time creating opportunities for his family and the families of friends to enjoy the out-of-doors and to participate in wholesome, character-building activities. Because of his contentment and his character, he always had the time and the resources to fulfill the commitments he made. With forethought he never allowed himself to get involved with anything which would interfere with what he judged important.

My father's commitments extended outside of his own family. Because our family physician was immersed in the practice of medicine, my father took our doctor's sons on vacation with us, and, as an act of friendship to one of his best friends, he watched over the doctor's sons like he did his own. In fact, an entire generation of young men in our community were watched over by my father, often without their knowledge. Often they

only became aware of his watch care when a need presented itself and there stood my father with the solution.

Yet, there is no place that his commitment was more demonstrated than in his work. When my father went to work for a company, that company received his full attention and his full commitment to its success. Because of his relentless pursuit of the interest of his employer, many began to identify him as the company because it was hard to separate the two. When his retirement approached, his “boss” told his replacement, “I’m sending you to Natchitoches to meet a man. You’re going to drive up and see a truck with a Louisiana Power and Light (LP&L) decal on it, but don’t be fooled, you are going to work for Holly Power and Light.”

The same lawyer mentioned previously told me a wonderful story about my father. The Cotton Seed Mill was the biggest user of electric power among the customers of Natchitoches City Power Company, but all of my life the power to this high electricity user was supplied by LP&L. The lawyer told me, “I was the attorney for the city. Do you know who negotiated the deal for LP&L getting the business of the Cotton Seed Mill? Your Daddy. And, do you know what he paid us for that franchise? Nothing. That’s why they had him down here; he was the company.” Several years before his death, I asked my father, “What did you enjoy most about your life?” He responded without hesitation, “The work because without the work, there is no life.”

It would not often be said of men, and in this my father was peculiar, but he loved children. And, his love for children was not only for his own. He particularly loved little girls. He never had one of us own but has two granddaughters and six great granddaughters. While he loved his sons, three grandsons and two great grandsons whom he knew and while he would have loved his third great grandson who was born seven weeks after his death, my father particularly loved and delighted in little girls. My father would “adopt” any child whose parents would allow him. He tirelessly spend hours and hours, day after day with other people’s children nurturing and caring for them. He even “adopted” a little girl at age one year who fifty years later is still part of our family.

My father was constantly active. He was not hyperactive, but he was constantly doing something. He loved to grow things and he was as comfortable behind a plow as he was sitting in a board room. His gardens were a work of art and his projects – oh, his projects – were legion. He always had a project. Whether it was turning Breazelle Springs into a youth retreat, or starting an Explorer Scout Troop, or building a new shed, he was always working on something. One of my favorite pictures of him is of his pulling corn in the garden. He worked a full day and then came home and did another day’s work. He was peculiar; he was special.

My father was not an emotional or sentimental man, but he was compassionate with a big heart. My father never failed to reach out to those in need. Whether it was helping search for the body of a drowning victim so that the healing could start for the family, or paying the hospital bill for a poor child, all you had to be in order to receive from him

was to have a need and for him to learn of it. His support of those in grief and sorrow was practical and physical. He was there and he was there to do what was needed to do. And, he was always accompanied by and supported by my mother.

My father was confrontational. He did not fear losing the love of or relationship with anyone. When an issue needed addressing; he addressed it. Whether it was a youth leader who was not leading, or one of his sons who was straying, my father would deal with the issue directly and openly. As a young adult, I often wondered why I was never involved with drug or alcohol. I realized it was because no one wanted to deal with my father and they knew if they offered either to me or my brother, that after dealing with us, he would find and “deal with them.” I often yearn for the days when bartenders, parents and drug dealers don’t say, “May I see your ID?” but rather ask, “By the way, who is your Daddy?”

My father was a commanding presence. Another of my favorite pictures of him is during World War II. He was photographed with the Fire Fighters at Essler Field in central Louisiana where he served during the war. At only twenty-one years of age, he was the fire chief and his father served under him. All of his life, in whatever group, this man who only finished high school was deferred to and looked to for leadership. He was quiet but his life spoke loudly.

My father was peculiar. I am grateful that a very thoughtful attorney taught me that. In this New Year, as we all look to our physical and mental health, we ought also to determine how we can be known as “peculiar” -- as special, unusual and one-of-a-kind.