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Mom's Famous Pie Crust

by Kwyn Bollinger

"All right, we are going to need...three-fourths of a cup of Crisco, two cups of flour, and one teaspoon of salt." My mother sets the ingredients and measuring cups on the counter accordingly. "Now, put all of that in the big bowl there and mix them together."

Nodding, I eagerly examine the things before me: the blue and white can of shortening, the big jar of flour, the salt container, the ceramic measuring cups. I'm not sure how all of this is eventually going to make a pie crust, but I trust my mother's judgement. She knows just what is needed for this sort of thing.

This is my first time making Mom's famous pie crust for myself, which is why I'm so excited. My mother is well-known for her pies. She usually bakes them for church lunches, which earns widespread approval among the congregation. Our pastor even compliments her baking abilities from the pulpit. After he's concluded the sermon for that morning and starts giving out announcements, he often says something like, "Also, next Sunday we'll be having a meal following the services...and Mrs. Martha's going to bake a pie," as he peers up at our pew with a humorous yet hopeful look. All of the church members laugh, and I glance down the pew to catch my mother's reaction. She just smiles modestly and nods. Our pastor seems satisfied.

Now, if I could just make pies like that is the phrase replaying itself in my mind. At the age of nineteen, I have yet to contribute much to the church luncheons in terms of baked goods. Another one is coming up, and this time I am determined to give baking a shot. So, I go to my mother for advice.

"Well, I'm making a pecan pie and a blueberry pie. Why don't you just help me make one of those?" she asks.

I am happy to comply, especially if it means unravelling the mystery behind Mom's heavenly pies. So there I stand, measuring out all of the ingredients and mixing them up per Mom's instructions. When the Crisco, flour, and salt combination starts to form pea-sized chunks, I am supposed to add



the contents of a smaller bowl. This one holds a thin, glue-like batter of flour and water. It lightly moistens the top of the other mixture as I pour it in. I start stirring once more.

To be truthful, pecan pie isn't my favorite flavor, but it is my dad's favorite. I couldn't help but think that's why Mom had chosen it. My parents, Scott and Martha, have been married for over forty years now. They complement each other so well, balancing out their relationship with their different personalities and abilities. Mom has always been a stay-at-home mom; Dad is a retired teacher and coach. When he was working, Mom would always listen to his stories about what was happening at school and discuss situations with him. She would often go to the games he was coaching to root him on. Now that Dad's retired, he does a lot of farmwork out at his mother's place, and Mom sometimes goes with him to spend time with relatives or do chores. They harmonize in a number of little ways, too. Mom, for example, washes the dishes; Dad dries them. Mom plays the piano at church; Dad plays the organ. Mom likes to bake pie; Dad likes to eat pie, especially pecan. They share a love of old Western shows, 60s music, and trips to the city. Something else they've shared in is the raising of their eleven children.

Our names in order from oldest to youngest are Kari, Kory, Karli, Kayli, Kami, Kolby, Kynzi, Kyler, Kwyn, Kade, and Kolton. Mom said the use of "K" as the first letter of everyone's name "just kind of happened." When I asked her why she and Dad decided to have eleven kids, she said that just kind of happened, too. We laughed at her nonchalant answer. For many people, however, that is no laughing matter. When I talk about the size of my family, most people have a hard time wrapping their minds around the parental duties that must be involved. How was my mother able to do it all? Deliver all those children? Change all those diapers? Doctor all those boo-boos? Listen to all the questions, chatter, and sometimes arguments from her little brood of people? Motherhood has taught my mom a number of things. One of them is not to procrastinate: "The things that need to be done, need to be done timely. Housework, doctor's visits, school needs...I try to make it a priority when we need something to get it taken care of."

She has always done all of this with such a graceful easy air that it took me a long time to realize how unusual having eleven children was. To Mom, I don't think it's unusual anymore. But what a job it really must have been for her: taking care of each one of us, relating to us on an individual level, and—perhaps most challenging—keeping so many people with differing personalities close together. Some of us kids are more quiet-natured and studious like our father; some of us are more plucky and outspoken like our mother, and some of us are something in between. Yet, we'd all been thrown into the same bowl together, so it was necessary that we mixed well. This didn't always happen smoothly, however. Conflicts among such a group were practically inevitable. According to my mom, the greatest challenge of motherhood is being a referee. She had to

develop an effective strategy to deal with disagreements among us kids.

"I usually separated the two that were fighting and made them go into different rooms where neither of them could see anyone," Mom recalled, "then I let them think about it for a while. Calmer heads prevail after that." She paused before adding, "If you jump in between two mean dogs that are fighting, you might get bit yourself."

Finding ways to relate to us was another thing that took work. My mom's method? "I try to have conversations with you and find out what your personality is, what your likes and dislikes are, and I try to encourage you in those fields. Everybody is born an individual, and everything about them that the Lord gives them makes them unique. That uniqueness is to be treasured and not stifled," she said wisely.

In the mixing bowl, the dough for my pie crust is starting to come together, but it's getting tiresome to use just a spoon to stir the thick substance.

My mother notices my struggle as she passes by the counter. "You can use your hands to blend the dough if it's too thick," she says. "Try to make it into a ball shape."

I act on her advice, sticking my hands in the gritty, moist dough in order to knead it out. Eventually, I achieve the desired rounded appearance. The texture of the dough clod is somewhat unpleasant, but that's where the rolling pin comes in.

Mom hands it to me. "Roll the dough as thin and in as much of a circle as you can. But don't roll it too thin, or it might tear," she says.

Up for the task, I set the dough on some flour-sprinkled paper towels, take the two handles of the rolling pin, and start working my way in. At first, the dough



tries to wrap itself around the pin, but, soon enough, it smooths out. Over and over again, I roll until the dough starts to resemble a big, gooey pancake. At one point, however, I see that I've stretched the dough too thin because it has ripped near one of the edges.

"Uh-oh," I say in dismay, frowning down at my blunder.

"Oh, that's all right," Mom says quickly, swooping in to fix it. She then easily patches it up with another piece of dough. "There ya go."

"Thanks," I say, rolling the pin over the added dough to blend it with the rest.

It had been hard to bid my siblings goodbye when they started leaving the house one by one. My five older sisters and one of my older brothers eventually found spouses and moved into homes of their own. Two of my other brothers also moved out after buying their own houses. At first, I was worried that I wouldn't get to see them very much anymore. We had been so close, and now they had all moved so far...well, at least to the other side of town. Some of them much farther than that, though. That's where Mom came to the rescue with her brilliant idea—Sunday lunches after church. Almost all of our immediate family attends the same church. After the morning services, it has become customary for everyone to gather at our house and share a meal prepared by Mom. Typical dishes include spaghetti, hamburgers, hotdogs, chicken, and tacos. My personal favorite is the turkey she makes around holidays. I also can't forget her delicious desserts.

My mother usually rises before the crack of dawn on Sunday mornings in order to set the food in readiness. Somehow, she manages to prepare food for over twenty people and clean up the whole house with some help from us and Dad. She is fifty-nine years old, but she seems to have just as much energy as I do. Mom also has an uncanny ability to look camera-ready within a matter of minutes, dark hair perfectly coiffed over her shoulders and natural-looking makeup accenting her full face and keen brown eyes—all of this before she leaves the house for the Sunday morning service. Then, it's back home in order to receive all of her guests and prep the food to be served. She never goes first through the food line. In fact, Mom is always helping to feed one of her five grandkids before she even thinks about getting anything for herself.

These Sunday afternoons have been wonderful for our household. Sitting at the table only to look up and find myself surrounded by my brothers, sisters, brothers-in-law, sister-in-law, nieces, and nephews is a true joy. At the center of it all, I see Mom presiding with the calm poise and dignified air of a queen. She smiles as she sits next to Dad, beams as she listens to a story from one of her daughters, and laughs as she feeds her grandson macaroni noodles that he keeps dropping "on accident." There is no question in my mind that the effort she puts into Sunday afternoons—the cooking, the cleaning, the entertaining—are part of the paste that holds my family together. My mom certainly enjoys these lunches, but she also sees them as part of her ministry. It's just one of the

many ways she reaches out to her kids. She knows that there will have to be times that we're apart, but she always makes sure our family isn't stretched too thin.

When the dough for the pie crust is the right size and consistency, it's time to flip it over the pie pan. Once the dough coat is fitting snugly over the white ceramic dish, my mother helps me press it into place and trim the excess from the edges.

"Another thing I do is go all around the edges, take a piece of dough, and jam it between my fingers," says Mom, demonstrating the procedure by pinching a small area and leaving a decorative triangular shape behind.

"Oh, what does that do?" I ask.

"It just makes it a little more special."

My mother never overlooks the details. Over forty years of marriage and almost as many of motherhood, she has learned all the finer points of family living. She's passed some of that knowledge down to me: things like making sure you take the price tag off a gift before you give it to someone, checking an egg carton for broken eggs before you buy it, or poking holes in a pie crust so that it won't bubble up. She has also mastered the art of little, random acts of kindness over the years. Many days I have come home from school to find a package of three chocolate chip cookies sitting on my bed. I know instantly Mom put them there. It may seem like a small thing, but it always brightens my day. Besides just the cookies, the knowledge that there is someone who cares enough to surprise me with something I enjoy is very comforting. These tidbits of wisdom and kindness are like the pecans sprinkled on top of the pie.

When the whole outer ring of the crust has been garnished, the pie pan goes into the oven at 350 degrees. Then, it is time to wait.

My mom has a lot of experience with waiting. Pain, silence, and the tears of her children have helped teach my mother to be strong. One of her favorite sayings is "In all things, give thanks." She explains, "I remind myself of that a lot when things are hard. There've been a lot of hard times, but a lot of wonderful times. You have to have the bad times to appreciate the good times, I think." She has constantly relied on her Christian faith to help her through all of those hard, messy, painful seasons that motherhood can bring.

Not only has my mother's faith helped her weather the hard times, but it has also helped her rejoice in the good times. She cites the greatest joy of motherhood as seeing her children trust in the Lord and walk by faith. "There is nothing a parent can do better than living a life that shows their children Christ," my mom declared. And my mom has certainly modeled this to me. Since my earliest days, I've known that she is someone I can go to with problems concerning



deeper, spiritual issues of life. I've benefitted so much from her wisdom and learned so much through her example. I can't deny that I've tried to imitate her in a number of ways. One of the highest compliments I've received on my appearance is being told that I look "just like my mother." I do resemble my mother. Same facial features and stature, calm demeanor, and keen brown eyes. I believe it would be just as good to look like her on the inside, too; when I look at my mother's life, I see something that I dream of having. Her faith, her influence, the way her entire family gathers around her on Sunday afternoons--all of it is inspiring to me. Someday, I want my children and their children to be sitting around my kitchen table smiling, laughing, and sharing stories with me as I sit next to my husband. Maybe they'll even be enjoying one of my pies from my mother's famous recipe.

My mom's description of her own parenting style is simple yet profound. While dwelling on this theme, she said, "I think that parents need to love their children just the way they are, not make them into something that they're not. If you love your children truly in a spiritual way, you'll be happy with them the way they are." She continues, "Maybe things won't turn out exactly the way you want them to, but that doesn't mean you stop trying or loving. You just have to see beyond today. You just have to keep praying they'll become the person the Lord wants them to become. Sometimes it doesn't happen overnight. Sometimes it doesn't happen for years..."

After ten minutes, the timer on the oven makes a beeping sound. I hurriedly sweep over to retrieve the pie pan. I set it down on top of the stove, where the ceramic dish makes a scraping sound against the rungs of the burners. The pie crust now appears more brown and stiff and has the pleasant aroma of homemade dough. After letting it cool for a while, Mom helps me put in the filling, which is a caramel brown color with a sweet taste. The finishing touch is to sprinkle pecans on top. The oval-shaped nuts cover the top of the gelatinous filling in a thick layer. Then the pie goes back into the oven so the filling can bake. Once everything is finished, Mom and I gaze down at the work of art.

"Looks good," says my mother. "You did a good job on it."

I beam. "Thanks." Though she probably has done most of the work, I feel quite pleased with myself.

Stepping into my mother's shoes for a moment and recreating her specialty has been illuminating. But have I found out the secret behind Mom's famous pie crust? There doesn't seem to be one. It is just Mom doing what she always does.

Everybody enjoys my pecan pie at the church lunch. At least, I assume they do because it all gets eaten. Thankfully, I manage to get a piece before it's too late. Despite my doubts about pecan pie, I find that I like it a lot. It is sweet, crunchy, and nutty all at once. My favorite part has to be the crust, though. It makes me happy to view the part of the pie I have worked the hardest on, right down to the decorative edges at the end of my slice. My family, who is sitting around the table with me, compliments me on my work.

Since then, I've learned something about pie crusts. Though they're the part of the pie that often gets overlooked, a lot goes into them. Sure, the filling seems to be the real centerpiece with its colorfulness and decoration; it's the part that's on display and reflects what type of pie it is. It can be composed of a variety of things: fruit, custard, pudding, meat, meringue, toppings. There are certainly a lot of things that go into the filling, and it is important that these ingredients blend well. The crust, though, is the shell; it's what holds everything together. Without it, everything would spill out and become disorganized. It provides the structure of the pie, the backbone. Without the crust supporting it, the filling wouldn't be able to stand up on its own. It needs the crust. The crust, in turn, warmly embraces the filling to help it reach its potential.

I wrote down the recipe for Mom's famous pie crust, and I keep it safely tucked away. It's already come in handy on more than one occasion. I know that it will continue to do so in the future, and I plan on using it often. It will be great to give those who come after me a taste of my mother's specialty. That way we will never forget what all goes into her famous pie crust, and I will never forget her lasting influence.

