

WHO THEN, IS THIS?
Sermon at Southminster
Mk4:35-41; Gen. 1;1-10
June 21, 2009

Happy Father's Day to all you great dads and granddads here! What a blessing and a pleasure to your families to have you in their lives! That includes your Southminster family, you know.

Every one of us has had a father, but unfortunately, not all of them have been wonderful, and not all of us have had our fathers in our lives for many different reasons. The memories we have of our fathers, especially from our formative and young adult lives, have a great influence on how we see God. So if our father was absent, abusive, cruel, or someone we were afraid of or couldn't respect, we have a hard time seeing God as Father to be any better or any more caring. Through faith, we can come to know our God as a true Father, one who does indeed love us. Richard Foster tells this story in his book, "Prayer."

One day a friend of mine was walking through a shopping mall with his two-year-old son. The child was in a particularly cantankerous mood, fussing and fuming. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet his son, but nothing seemed to help. The child simply would not obey. Then, under some special inspiration, the father scooped up his son and, holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu

love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key. And yet, as best he could, this father began sharing his heart. "I love you," he sang. "I'm so glad you're my boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh." On they went from one store to the next. Quietly the father continued singing off key and making up words that did not rhyme. The child relaxed and became still, listening to this strange and wonderful song. Finally, they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle his son into the carseat, the child lifted his head and said simply, "Sing it to me again, Daddy! Sing it to me again!"

And then Foster adds, "Prayer is a little like that. With simplicity of heart we allow ourselves to be gathered up into the arms of the Father and let him sing his love song over us."

The beautiful poem, the song of Creation in the first chapter of Genesis, is echoed and repeated in John 1: 1-4. We see our Trinitarian God here, before space, before time. God, God's Word, and God's Spirit. are all there in the beginning. Madeleine L'Engle puts it together this way: *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep.*

And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. The same Word was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was mad.

The New Interpreter's Study Bible has a special note for the beginning of John's Gospel. "For the Gospel of John, the beginning is not a particular event in time like Jesus' birth (as in Mt & Lk) or the start of Jesus' ministry (as in Mk). Instead, the beginning is outside the normal calculations of time, in the cosmic pre-existence of the Word with God. . . . the Gospel story is about the very character of God and how God makes Godself known to the world through the life and death of Jesus." *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.*

Jesus is God incarnate and this is what scripture tells us. But when Jesus walked the Earth, he had a very human body, a body that suffered exhaustion, and a spirit that was disappointed and saddened by being so often misunderstood. His mind and heart experienced anger and irritating frustration at the self righteousness, rigidity, and judgmentalness of the Jewish leaders. Power went out from him as well in compassion for the grieving, the sick and disabled, and the marginalized people all around him whom he healed. Jesus' humanness, though, according to Scripture, was balanced by his unbroken prayer relationship with God his Father, whom he

would address as “Abba,” in Aramaic, this is the term used by a child for its father, that we would recognize best as Dad, or Daddy.

This passage in Mark 4 reveals a very human, exhausted Jesus who is taken on an unnamed disciple’s boat after a very long day of teaching a crowd so large that he had to get in a boat on the sea to teach, so as to make room for all the people on the land. Then there was a private teaching session for his disciples and some others who were with them and around him.

“On that day, when evening had come,” Mark writes, “[Jesus] said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’ “And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was, and other boats were with him.” They took him “just as he was” and one can only wonder how to picture that. We are just told he went to the stern and fell asleep on a pillow, and we can assume it was right away. Haven’t you experienced the exhaustion that can follow a really demanding day that has taken all you have to give, and how wonderful the sense of relief when you can finally let it go and relax. Ever been there?

As the waves on the Sea of Galilee were filling their boat, the disciples hurried to wake Jesus and demand of him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?!” And, even weary though he was, and being

awakened from a deep sleep, Jesus got up and spoke to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” And there came a great calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” Although the disciples must have thought Jesus could do something or they wouldn’t have awakened him, the something he did was beyond their comprehension. They looked at him with wide eyes and open mouths; “Who then, is this?” they asked each other. “Even the wind and sea obey him!”

God created the wind and the sea and therefore can control them when he will. Jesus gave several signs that he was in fact from God, and calming the sea is one of them. But the idea was so unacceptable, so unbelievable, so out of the realm of their imagination, that the disciples couldn’t even begin to conceive of such a thing. Some scripture says their hearts were hardened, but it was their minds, their spirits, that could not encompass the thought of Jesus’ actual nature. To them, the Hebrew God was invisible. He lived in Heaven. He had given them the Law. The priest in the Temple was the only one who could approach God in his Holy of Holies. A prophet they could understand, and they did expect a Messiah, but one that was going to destroy all oppressors and take Israel back to its golden years. Jesus didn’t fit the bill.

Did they notice, did you notice, that Jesus gave them a choice and a plan on how to face the storm? “Why are you afraid,” he said., “Have you still no faith?”

Faith vs Fear. Fear is the opposite of Faith, not atheism. As people who say they believe and trust in God, I believe this is the real choice most of us face in the different crises of our lives.

In a recent episode of the TV show, “House,” a medical show where Dr. House heads his team in diagnostics, Dr. Chase is talking with a young woman patient who is a Catholic nun with severe and very painful physical symptoms. She and Dr. Chase have had casual conversation before about her faith in God, and how she knows God is with her. Dr. Chase is a young man, a good doctor, but he tells her he did at first want to be a Catholic priest, and he had some seminary training. His family wanted him to be a doctor like his father though, and put enough pressure on him so that he gave up the seminary and his desire to be a priest. Now he isn’t sure about his faith, and has gotten away from the church. So he makes comments about his doubt about God being with her and points out how her faith has not prevented her illness. He figures she better put her faith in the doctors and their tests.

Now this young nun is having additional extremely painful symptoms they have not been able to figure out, and she is dying. The doctors have done test after painful test, and have tried several different treatments, but cannot seem to find the cause of her condition which, in fact, has worsened with each test and/or treatment. She doesn't want to die but her organs are failing and she is in severe pain as well as struggling with doubt and a fear she is unable to control. Dr. Chase has come to her with yet another test they want to do, another treatment they have in mind which might just possibly save her life.

“No!” she tells him. She has finally resigned herself to her coming death, saying if it is God's will that she die now, she can't fight it anymore. Dr. Chase gets very firm with her, states that her choice right now is fear vs faith, and she is choosing fear. He tells her that is always our choice, and is always our test. Will we choose fear or will we choose faith? So she asks him, angrily, “What difference does it make if I am going to die anyway?” “The difference,” he says, “is in the way you will die.” Then she asks him why he left the seminary anyway. He says, “I failed my test, you don't have to fail yours.” Anyway, there is an interesting ending to this episode.

We are living in perilous times. But the humanity has always lived in perilous times. In general, we are much more conscious now of what is

going on all over the world, thanks to our incredible technology, and perhaps we are learning much more than we want to know – if anything, it has made us more fearful as a people and much less trusting of each other. So prayer is the way we open our hearts to let Christ’s Spirit in, and how we can increase our faith and trust in our living and loving God who has promised never to leave or forsake us, no matter what we must face. Or we will live our lives in fear and when the crises come, as they will, we can all too easily fall into panic, anger, bitterness, and despair.

Who then, is this who can calm our storms? Kate Layzer wrote in the current issue of *Christian Century*, “It’s not a tame Jesus that people are craving. They want the genuine undomesticated Savior, the One who loves fiercely and speaks sharply, who looks us in the eye and speaks to us of God’s uncompromising love, who startles us with more forgiveness than we think we deserve, who challenges us to extend the same to others. They want the Jesus who commands us to love enemies, serve the poor and see ourselves in the stranger. They want the Jesus who makes them cry in church – not out of sadness, but because after long years of trying everything else, they’ve brushed up against him and felt something inside begin to heal, and love reawakening when they thought it was gone for good.” (Kate Layzer, *Living By The Word*, in *Christian Century* June 16, 2009). That’s

the Savior I want, and through what I believe is a miracle of grace for me, I have learned to love.

I want to close with this quote from St. Augustine, who wrote in the 4th century CE, “Let us sing alleluia here on earth, while we still live in anxiety, so that we may sing it one day in heaven in full security. . . We shall have no enemies in heaven, we shall never lose a friend. God’s praises are sung both there and here, but here they are sung in anxiety, there in security; here they are sung by those destined to die, there, by those destined to live forever; here they are sung in hope, there in hope’s fulfillment; here, they are sung by wayfarers, there, by those living in their own country. So then. . . let us sing now, not in order to enjoy a life of leisure, but in order to lighten our labors. You should sing as wayfarers do—sing, but continue your journey. . . Sing then, but keep going.” Amen