

Of Fear and Faith and Fathers

Mark 4:35-41

Whitefish UMC

June 21, 2009

- † Do you remember a film a few years ago in which a man, who to the best of his family's knowledge, was just a typical insurance salesman from Indiana? In reality he was a highly trained government spy who spoke half a dozen languages fluently, could wield weapons with the best of them, and knew all kinds of tricks of the spy trade.
- † Although I can't remember the name of the movie, I clearly remember a scene in which the man and his son have traveled to Paris to track down the man's wife and the boy's mother who has mysteriously disappeared. The man is speaking fluent French into a payphone as he tucks a pistol into his belt.
- † As he emerged from the phone booth, his son, eyes big as saucers, looked at his own father and asked, "Who are you?" Something was up with his father that he had never before sensed or suspected.
- † And according to Tom Purcell, writing in a column in this week's *Daily Interlake*, that's a question that more children should be asking their fathers. Apparently more fathers should start acting like the steely, strong, aggressive spy instead of the mild-mannered insurance salesman, too.
- † As Purcell writes, "it's time for dads and men to remember how to be dads and men." Because "somewhere along the way,...[women] have decided to remake [men] in their own image." "Fathers can be found

misting up at baby showers and clapping enthusiastically the first time junior uses the commode.”

- † Underneath all the tongue-in-cheek humor of Purcell’s column, he makes some serious assertions—that men and fathers should reclaim their proper place in the family so that they can be respected for who they are instead of treated as “wimps and buffoons.”
- † It’s as if Purcell is asking today’s men and fathers “Who are you?” And there is fear underlying his rhetorical question. The fear is accompanied by bluster, as fear often is. And beneath the bluster lies the truth that our roles and identities as men and women have created a lot of confusion—chaos even.
- † One pastor tells the story of a morning in her household when everything unraveled before 7:00 a.m. As she packed lunches for the family’s two children, made breakfast, helped the kids get ready for school, the little girl, Lucy, asked if she could light a candle to make breakfast more special.
- † She writes, “And so my husband Tim supervised the lighting and then went to check something on his computer while I continued stirring the eggs on the stove. A few minutes later our son Taylor, who was 11, and a little neighbor girl, whom we drove to school every morning, burst into the kitchen, crying and hollering: ‘Lucy is on fire!’
- † Well, it was one of those surreal moments--both Tim and I flew into the dining room and, sure enough, Lucy was running around in circles with the top of her head blazing like a tiki-torch. She'd leaned a little too close to the candle, her hair had ignited, and apparently it didn't occur to her to stop, drop and roll. I got there first and immediately

smothered her head with my robe. I made sure the fire was out, did a quick examination and saw that her skin hadn't been burned, only her hair, and so I relaxed a little and held Lucy who by that time was shaking like a leaf. Tim and I breathed a big sigh of relief. She was all right and that was the main thing.

- † But as you may know, there are few smells in the world more revolting than that of burning hair; and Taylor, who's always had a keenly sensitive nose, became...well...sick right then and there...which of course served as an invitation to our two Labrador Retrievers--who bolted into the room cheerfully to clean up the mess--the sight of which immediately prompted the little neighbor girl to become sick. It was this chain reaction nightmare! So there I stood at 6:45 in the morning in my scorched bathrobe, on that very messy floor, picking ash out of my daughter's hair, thinking to myself, "How did things go completely NUCLEAR before seven a.m.?"
- † Now that's chaos. And there is more than enough of it in our homes and our culture these days. Do you ever feel as if your hair is on fire a good percent of the time?
- † In today's scripture, the disciples are experiencing a kind of "hair on fire" moment of their own as they cower in the bottom of a little boat on the Sea of Galilee. Remember that in the ancient world, a stormy sea was symbolic for chaos—the chaos and uncertainty of life in a world beyond control.
- † Their world is being tossed about like a cork on the ocean and Jesus is in the boat with them, asleep, for heaven's sake. With proverbial hair on fire, they holler, "Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?"

And Jesus responds to them immediately by ordering the seas to become still as glass.

- † “Peace! Be still!” he says, to seas, and of course also to the men. And if they were afraid before in the chaos of the storm, now a different sort of fear overtakes them.
- † It’s as if they are saying, “Who are you?” The one who has called them has healed the sick and cast out demons, drawn crowds—a charismatic person and leader to be sure. But now he even calms the chaos of the storm, so they begin to wonder if they really are in the presence of God’s chosen one, of God’s own power.
- † Being in the presence of God is something we both want and, if we are honest, fear as well. We want to know God’s strength and peace, but inside deep down we know that something will be demanded of us at the same time.
- † And sometimes it can even become rather comfortable in that little boat. The chaos keeps us hunkered down and unwilling to risk rocking the boat any more than it already rocks.
- † Last week Marvin spoke of limping and leaping and acknowledged that our identities occasionally become dependent on our limbs and our fears. It’s then that we fear being in the presence of Christ who will ask us to be transformed by his peace.
- † There are so many storms that buffet our lives. In our personal stories, we may find ourselves without a job, missing our absent spouse, facing a terrible diagnosis from the doctor, or wondering what on earth we will do with our lives.
- † And even in our congregations we experience thunderstorms that have the potential to devastate. Fear threatens to sink us when change

- happens too fast, when we feel we are losing control of who we are, when new people don't do things the way we'd like them done.
- † The church father, St. Augustine, Bishop of Hyppa, says: *When you have had to listen to abuse, that means you are being buffeted by the wind. When your anger is aroused, you are being tossed by the waves. So when the winds blow and the waves mount high, the boat is in danger, your heart is imperiled, your heart is taking a battering.*
 - † *On hearing yourself insulted, you long to retaliate; but the joy of revenge brings with it another kind of misfortune—shipwreck. Why is this? Because Christ is asleep in you. What do I mean? I mean you have forgotten his presence. Rouse him, then; remember him, let him keep watch within you, pay heed to him.”*
 - † The British Navy has a strange custom. If there is a sudden disaster aboard ship, the “still” is blown. A whistle calls the crew to a moment of silence in a time of crisis. When the still is blown, people aboard know what it means, “Prepare to do the wise thing.”
 - † Observers of this practice note that the moment of calm has helped avert many a catastrophe. It has prevented many scatterbrained actions.
 - † What if we, all of us who act as if our hair is on fire much of the time, were to practice the still? In a way, that's what the disciples were doing as the seas calmed and they acknowledged the presence of God in their midst.
 - † Frederick Buechner preached a beautiful sermon on this passage that points us in this direction. “Jesus’ answer to what to do next, what to do with the rest of our lives [and who we are meant to be] is simply stated.

- † What he says to them is Go...Go for God's sake, and for your own sake, too, and for the world's sake. Climb into your little tub of a boat and keep going."
- † "Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and...in whatever way we can, we must call on him as the fishermen did in their boat to come awake within us and to give us courage, to give us hope, to show us, each one, our way."
- † Each of us struggles with the question, "Who are you?" Are we fearful passengers on a boat bobbing without rudder in the stormy sea? Or are we in touch with the sleeping Christ within our deepest selves.
- † Yes, it's Father's Day, and the world is a confusing place for men and fathers and sons and daughters, too. Many of us are in that in-between time where our roles are changing and we aren't sure who or where we are.
- † Listen to this story by a retired United Methodist pastor, F. Richard Garland:
- † "It would not be a long visit. Dad was in the hospital. The cancer had come back, and the outlook was bleak. "I know you're busy Richard, the holidays and all," Mom had said, "But I think Dad would like to see you." She didn't have to finish the sentence. She never did anyway. I knew. I was on the next plane.
- † You're never quite prepared to see you father in the hospital. You'd rather be bowling, or golfing, or working in the gardens together -- anywhere else. That was in the past now. He smiled when I came into the room. "I'm glad you came, Son." I leaned over his bed and gave

him a hug, careful not to hurt him. We had never been hugging men; but that, too, was in the past now. "I'm glad I'm here."

- † We talked nonstop. It was unusual for us. In the past we could spend hours side by side, and just a few words would suffice. In the season that we had grown apart we didn't talk at all. Now the shared memories came spilling out as we put the finishing touches on our relationship. There was a procession of visitors -- neighbors, friends, his pastor, even one of my old girl friends. Every one had a story, and it surprised me how much laughter and how little sadness was in the room.
- † The two days went quickly, too quickly. I stopped in at the hospital on the morning of the last day before heading to the airport. We were quieter. The words weren't necessary for what we had begun to feel. "I'll have to be going in a little while."
- † "I know. It's OK, Son. It was good to see you."
- † "Can I do anything for you before I go, Dad?"
- † He hesitated, then said: "Yes, would you be willing to give me a shave? I haven't had a good shave since I got to the hospital."
- † I was stunned. As a child I loved to watch my daddy shave. We'd stand in the bathroom in our underwear. He'd lather up and then soap my face just like his. And while he shaved, I pretended. It was a silly, sacred ritual -- a bonding that I had all but forgotten. Now he was asking me for a shave.
- † I found his old razor and the tube of shaving creme in the kit he had brought with him -- they were so familiar even after all these years. I filled a bowl with hot water and found a face cloth. With the bed raised, the pillow fluffed and a towel spread under his chin to keep

him dry, I began the ritual. First the face cloth, warmed with the hot water, wrung out and held gently to his face to soften the whiskers. Then a little bit of water on the face to receive the cream. When I opened the tube, it was the same aroma I remembered as a child. Dad's eyes were closed but he was clearly enjoying this. I spread the creme and prepared the razor. I was so afraid that I would cut him. He was so trusting. Dip the razor in the water, shave a few strokes. Dip, shave. Dip, shave. It didn't take that long. When we finished shaving, I got some clean hot water and washed his face. He put his hand up and felt his face and smiled. I handed him the mirror and he took a long, satisfied look. "Son, that's the best shave ever. Thanks!

† Soon it was time to go. We hugged, gently. "I love you, Dad." "I love you too, Son." We had only lately learned to say that. It felt good. What felt better was the trust that had finally established itself between us -- a trust that had made it possible for a son to give his father the best shave ever. It is a holy remembrance, sacramental even. Love is like that -- born in due season of common things made holy by the amazing grace and surprising Presence of God."

† So this Father's Day, consider the mysterious reality of God's love and presence with us in both the ordinary and chaotic times. Pay attention to the sleeping Christ in you, leading you, guiding you, as you answer the question, "Who are you?"

† Let God's awesome presence show you the way of love and true identity.

† Amen.

Sources:

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