



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida
3 Pentecost - Proper 7 - Year B - June 20/21, 2009 (Fathers' Day Weekend)
1 Samuel 17:32-40; Ps. 9:9-20; **Mark 4:35-41**
Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

Today's Gospel reading is from Mark and is one of my favorites. The story is so vividly told, you can picture the whole scene. Jesus has had a long day of teaching an unspecified crowd about the kingdom of God, teaching them everything in parables. Jesus strings these parables together, one after another: "a sower went out to sow" (Mark 4:3 ff); the kingdom of God being as though "someone scattered seed on the ground and it grows he knows not how" (Mark 4:26 ff), or like "a mustard seed the smallest of seeds, which grows into a great shrub" (Mark 4:31 ff). Mark notes, "*With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, except that he explained everything to his disciples*" (Mark 4:33-34). If you were in church last week, you know that's how the Gospel reading ended.

And immediately after this parable marathon, Mark writes, "*On that day, when evening had come, he said to his disciples, '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...*" (Mark 4:35-36), which I take to mean, without further ado, exhausted as he was. And there is a note "*that other boats were with him*" (Mark 4:36).

But then, a great windstorm arises (Mark 4:37). It is sudden...It is furious and it is frightening. It is also not a rare occurrence on the Sea of Galilee. One source tells us, "Such storms result from differences in temperatures between the seacoast and the mountains beyond." According to this source, "The Sea of Galilee lies 680 feet below sea level. It is bounded by hills, especially on the east side where they reach 2000 feet high. These heights are a source of cool, dry air. In contrast, directly around the sea, the climate is semi-tropical with warm, moist air. The large difference in height between surrounding land and the sea causes large temperature and pressure changes. This results in strong winds dropping to the sea, funneling through the hills. The Sea of Galilee is small, and these winds may descend directly to the center of the lake with violent results. When the contrasting air masses meet, a storm can arise quickly and without warning. Small boats caught out on the sea are in immediate danger."¹

This source adds a concluding note, "The Sea of Galilee is relatively shallow, just 200 feet at its greatest depth. A shallow lake is 'whipped up' by wind more rapidly than deep water, where energy is more readily absorbed."²

Well, according to Mark, that's what happened. A storm was whipped up and waves beat into the boat so that it was being swamped. The disciples are terrified. Where is Jesus when all of this is going on? He's asleep in the stern of the boat. Wow! He must have been exhausted.

The disciples are in a panic...anxious and afraid. They wake Jesus up, you can imagine how that looked! And they said to him, *“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?”*(Mark 4:38)

What an understandable question that is. What a painfully honest, primal, understandable question that is: Do you not care? How often, when we are in crisis, anxious and afraid in the midst of life storms and battering waves, we turn to God in desperation, and cry, “Do you not care?”

At this point, the miraculous healings those disciples have already witnessed have very little significance for them. The evidence that God is somehow powerfully present in the person now asleep in the stern of the boat is irrelevant to them in that moment. They could care less about his teachings and in that wave battered boat, being swamped by the tempestuous winds of the storm-tossed Galilean Sea, his homely parables about the kingdom of God appear to be just a bunch of nonsense. Where is God now? they want to know. *“Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?!”*

According to Mark, *“He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace, be still!’ And the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to those on the boat, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’”*(Mark 4:39 – 40).

Mark adds, *“And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’”*(Mark 4:41). Who is this indeed?

Today’s Gospel reading is clearly about trust and faith. It is also an assertion of the power of Jesus over the forces of nature and of chaos. Some interpreters see this story as a paradigmatic story for a church confronted by persecution and upheaval in a hostile world. There is merit to all of these observations.

But it is the last verse and the question at the end of the story that capture my attention today: *“And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’”*(Mark 4:41).

In American society today, many children and youth are not being raised with a sense of religious awe, and wonder, and understanding and many do not, and will likely never know, who Jesus really is; that is, as one in whom they can have faith and put their trust, especially when they find themselves in the storm-tossed seas and wave battered boats of life’s circumstances. They do not, and likely will not, know him as one who can stand with them, and face the howling winds of life and say, “Peace, be still!” and then find that calm and inner solitude follow

It is Father’s Day and I am, naturally, remembering my father, who died of lung cancer in 1995. My parents separated when my twin brother and I were 3, and divorced a couple of years after that. We were blessed, because my father was the ideal father in a divorce situation. He was constant in his care and attention for us, and regular in his visitations and child support. And I am aware that this is not always the case. We were blessed in having parents who shared a common concern for us and who set aside their personal issues for our sakes. My dad was a constant presence in my life and I am deeply thankful that my father was the kind of man he was. My memories of him are filled with fondness and love and deep affection. I am thankful for many things and certainly for the influence he had on my formation as a person of faith.

Research has indicated that mothers in families have the strongest influence on the faith formation of their children. In one frequently cited survey of 7 -12 graders in

500 mainline churches, 81% of boys and 74 % of girls said that their mother was the most influential factor in their faith development.³

Fathers however, had the second strongest influence: 50% of girls and 61% of boys said their fathers were the strongest influence in their faith formation and development. (Pastor, grandparent, youth group and friends were the next most influential, in that order).⁴

Not that long ago, as I was working on a project and considering this data, it struck me that I would number myself among those whose fathers played the more influential role. My mother was not insignificant in my faith formation, but my father had the stronger influence.

My father was exceptionally faithful. He was an attorney by profession and a devoted lay Episcopalian who attended church every week. Family was a central core value for him and his second marriage to my stepmother Barbara was a very happy one and he continued to be a great father to the children of that marriage, and to my twin brother and me. My dad also lived a life of service to his church and his community.

My dad loved to talk about theology and philosophy. He loved critical thinking and the “Socratic Method” of probing with questions. I would make a statement about God and he would respond, “What do you mean by “God?” Who is God to you? Define your terms”

From the time I was a young boy, I have vivid recollections of countless “caring conversations” with my father sitting in the living room, or in his immaculately kept garden, or walking around the town on the Jersey shore where we spent some summers, or along the sidewalks of Forest Hills, New York where he lived, talking about the big things of life – God, and who Jesus was, about good and evil, war and politics and love. We watched very little TV in that house. Instead, we engaged in conversations.

What a sharp contrast with what is happening too often today with children and youth who recent research shows are so wired up and connected to mass media that they are increasingly “disconnected” from caring adults and authoritative communities.⁵ Again, very contemporary research shows that this disconnection with persons and authoritative caring communities is resulting in increasingly unwell children and youth with a variety of emotional and spiritual illnesses.⁶

As American society continues to become less Christian and our children and youth increasingly disconnected and irreligious,⁷ we need to celebrate and encourage those men: fathers, grandfathers, uncles and big brothers, and those surrogate fathers and grandfathers, uncles and big brothers who are not only faithful, but who take seriously their relationships and their role in the moral and faith formation of the children and youth entrusted to their care. Men who assume this role and take their relationships and responsibilities seriously are an important treasure we need to not only preserve and defend, but to raise up and multiply.

Too often today, the portrayals of men in popular culture are caricatures, filled with stupidity and stereotypes, with oafs who can't think and who are portrayed as shallow and self-centered. (Women don't come off any better in popular culture's portrayal). As for men, just watch a half hour of TV during an NFL or Major League Baseball game and track how the commercials portray men if you don't believe me.

And sadly, too often, in our society today, men are a problem. Our nation's prison population is the largest among industrialized nations and is also overwhelmingly male.

Men commit the vast majority of violent crimes and are most often the perpetrators of domestic abuse. So significant work needs to be done on men's spiritual and emotional health in our society, beginning with how our society defines the role of men and how men understand themselves.

It is a sad reality that the vitally important role men are called to have in raising children and youth, and in inculcating them with faith and meaningful values, is too often denigrated in society.

I am deeply thankful for the role my father played in my life. I could go to my dad with anything. Most of all, I am thankful for the faith which my father modeled and passed onto to me as an inheritance, a faith which is not afraid of vigorous inquiry and which has also sustained me through the storms and tempestuous times in my life.

On this Father's Day, as I pray to my Father in heaven in church, and remember my dad who helped teach me about the things that are most important, I am thankful to the men and for the men of this parish who are faithful, and who play such an important role in all our lives and especially in the lives of our children and youth, forming faith in our children and youth, by the power of the Holy Spirit, through personal trusted relationships in their homes, and on the beach, and on the fishing boat, and on the sports field and whenever and wherever the important conversations and caring times of life occur. There is nothing, not one single thing that is more important or more vital in the world.

¹ See ChristianAnswers.net at <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-eden/ednk-seaofgalilee.html>

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³ Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations - The Search Institute, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1988-89.

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⁵ Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities, 2003; Dartmouth Medical School, Institute for American Values, YMCA

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⁷ See American Religious Identification Survey 2008 (ARIS 2008)
http://livinginliminality.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/aris_report_2008.pdf