

PUSHING US FORWARD

Sermon preached by the Rev. Barbara E. Davis

May 10, 2009

Mother's Day

Scripture: Luke 1:46-55; John 2:1-11

My daughter Hannah has always had an independent streak. She is not the kind of child depicted so often in advertisements or commercials holding their smiling parent's hands while taking the first unsteady steps on colt-like legs. Any help offered to Hannah as she was learning to walk prompted the "flop-down;" a hand offered by a parent and she would immediately sit down wherever she was until we ignored her so she could begin trying to walk on her own. At nearly 2 and ½ years old now, she is steady on her feet, but she is still full of that same independent thinking, expressed frequently in her favorite request, "Let me do it myself!"

Two weeks ago she began a new phase in exerting her independence. It began over the age-old struggle between parents and children about dessert, in this case, a Popsicle. Having left the dinner table without eating any dinner to go play in her room, she suddenly remembered that she wanted a Popsicle and ran into the kitchen. When I explained that she hadn't eaten any dinner and that we don't have dessert until we've eaten dinner, she promptly flung herself onto the ground in tears. A few moments later, tears past, but disappointment still looming, she went to the coffee table and rather than just leaning against it as she often does, rocking on her stomach, she rolled her whole self onto the coffee table and refused to budge.

I asked her to get down. No response. I asked her again. I got a look conveying that the only possible way she was getting off that coffee table was with a Popsicle in her hand. I asked her again. It was one of those moments in parenting when I should have taken a deep breath. It's a little difficult to describe what happened next, because I lost my temper. For whatever reason, this coffee table roll challenged my own sense of authority to the breaking point. I raised my voice; I demanded she go into a timeout; she refused. I carried her to the "timeout" corner. She cried and refused to stay in the timeout. The battle lost, but my anger still very present, I went to my own corner to think about why I was so angry. Eventually, we worked it out, without Popsicles or timeouts; it was a vivid reminder of how imperfect the task of parenting is.

It's not always easy to admit the challenges of parenting. Parents in New York City make up a unique sub-culture, and it is a sub-culture often depicted in very un-flattering ways. From Broadway's *God of Carnage* about two couples failing miserably to sort out their children's playground dispute, to the "playground-to-English phrasebook" in a recent issue of Time Out Kids, where parents are coached to understand that when another parent says something to you such as "My children have no interest in TV" it really means "My family is intellectually superior to yours," parenting is represented as not only imperfect but somewhat despicable business.

Parents need encouragement that their imperfections are okay as much as they need respite from the cultural ideas of parenting that get splashed onto them. A friend recently remarked to me that she wished people were as free with their praise of parents as they were with their criticisms. I know what she means. It is not uncommon for people to intervene in that brazen New York way to offer advice to parents who are struggling with some parenting issue in public – how to get your crying child into the stroller, why your child should be wearing a coat or socks, what your child should eat or not eat, there is no boundary to what unsolicited advice parents receive, but seldom does anyone say, “I really liked the way you handled that question” or “that was a really loving response to what your child needed.”

Our faith can provide models of encouragement and respite for parents, and for all who struggle more fully into the relationships they have as adult children, as partners, as friends and as disciples. There are many parenting situations depicted in the biblical texts, and few of them are flawless. Perhaps none is more flawed than the relationship between Mary and adult Jesus in the gospels. After the birth narratives, Joseph all but disappears from mention, but Mary appears from time to time, and when she does there is a consistent disconnect between her expectations and Jesus’ expectations.

For example, her appearance in the passage from chapter 2 of John’s gospel that Edee read for us this morning, Mary’s presence highlights how displaced she is in her role as Jesus’ parent, and how exposed she is in her misunderstanding. Still, the woman who cherished the good news of Jesus’ birth in her heart and proclaimed the magnificence of God, Mary wants to push Jesus forward into his ministry. Listen again to how John’s gospel describes their conversation:

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’ His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’

The two actually say very little to each other, but our minds focus on how Jesus addresses his mother, “Woman,” he calls her. It is a response to her statement; the subtext of which he hears as a request. “The have no wine,” she says. Clearly it is not a simple observation on her part, but it is implied by her and understood by him that he is to do something. “Woman,” he said to her, “what concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come.”

Much has been made and interpreted of his address to her as “woman” in this narrative. It may have been a common expression to call one’s mother “woman”, yet it does have a distancing effect, especially out of the mouth of Jesus, who addressed God as “Abba” or “Daddy”, planting the intimate father metaphor for God deeply into our tradition.

Yet, if we look at the content of Jesus and Mary’s conversation beyond the address, the interaction seems to contain an intimacy of knowledge and partnership. “What concern is it to you and me?” Mary is intertwined with Jesus’ ministry in her concern, and while he asserts that “My hour has not yet come” the fullness of the hour not having arrived does not mean he will not

act. Mary suspects and acknowledges as much in her direction to the servants to “Do whatever he tells you.”

Mary fades into the background for the rest of this narrative and even the rest of the gospel. She is mentioned going to Capernaum with the disciples and Jesus’ brothers and Jesus after the wedding, and she is not mentioned again in John’s gospel until the crucifixion. Mary has a confidence in her role as Jesus parent that may magnify the parental metaphor in the bible more than we realize. Let me say it another way, Mary’s understanding of herself as mother may help us understand more about God the father.

Church historian Roberta Bondi tells the story of how as a child she attended vacation Bible school and revival at Pond Fork Baptist Church, and how the image of God the father gave her nightmares. She describes it: “The source of my nightmares was the assumption that my heavenly Father was like my earthly father, only more so. My earthly father, whom I worshiped and resented in equal measure, was a remarkable man. He was brilliant, funny, and full of life. He was a loving man, but in those years of his youth, he also tolerated no imperfections or weakness in other people, no laziness, no disobedience from his children or his wife, no sullenness, no arguing with him or asking “why.” ...I loved my father so much, yet I knew I could never please him. I was angry with him and guilty over my poisonous, secret anger. I could not possibly believe my human father loved me as I was. And if that was true of my earthly father, how much more must this be the case with my heavenly Father. Surely, my heavenly Father’s standards for females had to be stricter than my earthly father’s.”

She goes onto explain, “all of this is very interesting, no doubt, but I tell it not because I am so infinitely fascinating. I tell it because in many different versions it is the personal history of so many people --- women, and a surprising number of men, too, if you take out the parts about being female. For so many of us the language of God the Father, and our own painful experiences of ourselves and our human fathers are tangled together. So many of us think we have no choice but to cut off great chunks of ourselves as we handle the pain, by either refusing to call God father at all, or by using father language without allowing ourselves (or others) to question what this language means to us.”¹

Dr. Bondi’s observations challenge us to ask ourselves: what does the parenting language in the biblical texts mean to us? It is not only a question about the metaphor of God as “father.” It is a question of metaphor mirroring perfection. Not only does it tangle our own understanding of our parents with God, it limits our ability to imagine a God who struggles to become a better parent alongside us. If all we hear from the biblical cloud of witnesses are the two extremes of separation (as we often experience with Mary and the adult Jesus) and perfectionism (as seems to be implied in the God the father metaphor), how are we to move forward?

Mary as mother is still growing as a parent, even in her relationship with her adult son. In showing this aspect of her relationship to him, she provides an understanding of a parent who is still becoming. Her experience of parenting can be interpreted as having a unique fullness; and that fullness, the joys and the disappointments, reflects a way of understanding a God who pushes us forward. For if Mary is a parent who is still becoming, maybe God the Father is also a metaphor of becoming instead of perfecting.

Wendy Mogel, a psychologist and educator, is the author of a book titled “The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children.” In this book she notes that “the Talmud sums up the Jewish perspective on child-rearing in a single sentence: ‘A father is obliged to teach his son how to swim.’ Jewish wisdom holds that our children don’t belong to us. They are both a loan and a gift from God, and the gift has strings attached. Our job is to raise our children to leave us.”²

Whatever the make-up of our families, the work of becoming in those relationships is how we learn to swim. Our encouragement comes from the knowledge that whoever we are there is one who accompanies us who wants to teach us to swim. We are loved by a God, who like Mary, wants to push us forward.

If Jesus was treading water at the wedding in Cana, Mary’s push was the starting point of his becoming a much stronger swimmer. We can expect that as children and parents, partners and friends, followers and questioners, we are being pushed forward to become stronger swimmers. The God who seeks us no doubt has to overcome the urge to overprotect us; yet God knows as well as we do that we need to take those first tentative strokes on our own. From there, we all have the opportunity to become stronger swimmers.

¹ Bondi, Roberta. Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life. (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1995), p. 25 and 27.

² Mogel, Wendy. The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Social Teachings to Raise a Self-Reliant Children. (Penguin: New York, NY, 2001), p. 90.