

June 22, 2008: A Sunday school teacher was examining her students after a series of lessons on God's omnipotence. She asked: "Is there anything God, the Father, can't do?"

There was silence. Finally, one lad held up his hand. The teacher, disappointed that the lesson's point had been missed, asked: "Well, just what is it that God can't do?" "Well," replied the boy: "He can't please everybody." (Gary W. Houston, *Cowherding Christians*, CSS Publishing Company)

I realized, after my last message, how difficult it may be to take in certain aspects of Scripture. These expectations of God are often revealed in what is commonly referred to as "conviction." In the secular world, we often refer to conventional wisdom with the statement, "I resemble that remark." In God's kingdom, in the light of His wisdom, we may feel the weight of the Word when it contradicts the way we've come to live our life, especially when God's Word calls for radical change in our lives. That is, what I refer to as, "God's nudge." It is at those times that I gain further understanding into God's grace...

As a pastor, I've been appointed to preach the Word, administer the sacraments, and follow the order, the discipline, of my denomination. This effort often calls for teaching. For the next 24 weeks you will find this faith sharing, as the "Basics of Christian Belief and Discipleship," 1-24, as part of the bulletin insert. If we are called, as stated in Matthew 28, to make disciples for Jesus Christ, this information will assist us in the two main aspects of the Church, not only to make disciples but to worship God in unity and love. As I mentioned last time, "God loves you just the way you are..." and let me add the prophetic, that "He loves you so much, he doesn't want you to stay the way you are!" Further, anything I feel compelled to share is from the experience of my life through prayer, my study of God, and my living with you in community. I do this sharing out of love for you. I am looking to finding the best in you and I ask that you do the same for me. Anything less, violates the law of love that Jesus uses to sum all that is required of those who use his name.

Matthew 10:24-39 - The Love of a/the Father...

It is not easy being a father. One cynic, speaking from his own experience, noted that children go through four fascinating stages. First they call you DaDa. Then they call you Daddy. As they mature they call you Dad. Finally, they call you collect (author unknown). Well...I've thought a lot about being a dad, especially lately, as my youngest, Mackenzie, has announced his engagement. May 17, 2009 will come quickly...

Today we salute fathers. Yes, Father's Day was last Sunday, but I wasn't here to celebrate with you and today's scripture is right on! So... Dads, we love you. The role of a Christian father is more important in today's world than ever before. It is a different

roll than in earlier generations. In most households today Dad is called upon to play more of a nurturing role in caring for children. If Mom works outside the home, Dad must take a more active role in doing household chores. Dad is no longer "lord of the castle." Hopefully, however, he has not been reduced to being another of the vassals.

Today's father needs to be nurturing of his children, supportive of his wife, and yet at the same time provide the spiritual leadership of the home that the Bible accords to fathers. It is a rare man, a special kind of man, who can combine all three of these qualities. We salute Christian fathers this day. Your family needs you more than ever before. Hang in there!

The most common image that Jesus used in describing God was that of "Father." It makes me think that Joseph must have been a very special kind of father. We center much of our attention on his mother, Mary, but Joseph must have also combined those very special qualities of strength and gentleness that we associate with Jesus. Jesus had a very keen knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures. In the Jewish home it was the father who had the primary responsibility for his son's religious instruction. Of course we know that Jesus had a unique relationship with God. Still, I have to believe that Joseph, though barely mentioned in the Gospel narrative, was probably an influential role model for Jesus. Why else would Jesus have chosen the imagery of "Father" to portray God?

In Matthew 10: 29-31 we have one of the most important Scriptural reminders of the love of our Heavenly Father for His children. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" Jesus asks, "And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows." What a moving testimony to the very intimate love that God has for each of us.

A loving father wants what is best for his children. He fairly acknowledges the challenges of the world.

I grew up in a post-World War II society. To quote Rueben P. Job, from *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living*, "people of (my baby-boomer generation) were convinced that our world would be drawn together in harmony, peace & plenty. The sacrifices made during the war were so enormous that it seemed certain that we would never again permit our world to be so divided. But here we are in a world where divisions are growing deeper every day. We had this naïve expectation that we would just get better as we became educated and shared more of the world's riches. It looked like a natural and easy path to follow. Forgetting the struggles and sacrifices of the past may have led to a complacency that took community too lightly, individualism too seriously, and neglected our call to faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ."

“But alas, the world of peace and plenty for all has not happened. Nations are increasingly hostile toward one another; communities are divided around the issue of education, development, and the status quo (Do you remember how difficult it was to gain community support for the new school?). Religion is divided with each claiming to have a firm grip on the truth. Denominations and congregations are divided over doctrine and what constitutes faithful discipleship and mortal sin (that the sin that leads to permanent death)... and families are divided by competing agendas, rival priorities, and the daily pressure to survive and thrive in an increasingly (caustic) culture.” It is my opinion that as “Christians,” as the living Body of Christ, we must be constantly asking if this is the way “We” are called to live!?

Are we the living answer to the prayer of Jesus, “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17:11b)? Do we look at one another and see movement toward our oneness with Christ? Do others look at us and see God, the Father, at work in our life together? Is our way of living life-giving (in other words, building up the Body in all that we do) rather than life-draining? Is our way of living one that will enhance the quality of life of each of us for as long as we live? These are tough questions if taken seriously.

I think it is fair to say that at our best, Christians believe that the possibility of such a way of living exists and is open to all. When we have seen such a way of living practiced, we have not only been inspired, but many have been drawn to it. In our better moments we know we have not lived up to that shared belief of living the good and faithful life with Jesus at the very center of all we do and are. Deep within, I believe all of us do want to live that faithful and fruitful life even though we have often turned away from God’s invitation to holy living, with God as our priority.

If we look to Colossians 3:12-14 for the stewardship of this relationship, we read: “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

The good news is that God, the Father, gives us the ability to stop living by the world’s standards, if we are willing to comply with the “Way” of Jesus that is neither generally

understood nor trusted against the world's standard of living. It is my responsibility to assist in paving a road that promises to take the faithful traveler ever nearer God, our true Father, and God's chosen way for God's people.

Most of us learn to live a relatively faithful life in Christ. We want to be faithful. We do want to practice our faith in ways that are healing and life-giving, not destructive and life-denying. We cannot be strangers to honest conversation, patience, loving acceptance, compromise, and mutual agreement, as we must not be strangers to forgiveness, conversion, transformation, reconciliation, and new life.

John Wesley anticipated times like these, and he knew that everyone needs help to live a holy and good life in a world like ours. He feared that new converts to Christ would fail to practice their faith and would, in his words, become more a "child of the devil" than before their conversion (John Wesley "Journal," Works, Vol. 1, page 239).

John was fully aware that we could have all the structures and systems right but could lose the power of the Father that translates into a Christ-like life—a way of holy living that is constantly reforming and renewing the individual, the family, and the community. Because of these fears, Wesley was determined to foster the disciplined practices that would lead to faithfulness to the way of Jesus.

It was these simple rules that transformed and gave new life to women and men of all backgrounds, setting them on a path that would become a movement that formed a denomination and transformed a forming nation. In sum, the three simple rules are as follows: "Do No Harm; Do Good; Stay In Love with God!"

From the United Methodist Book of Discipline,

"These are the General Rules of our Societies (as Methodist Churches were known); all of which are taught by God to observe, even in his written Word, which is the only rule, both of our faith and practice. All of these we know his Spirit writes on our truly awakened hearts." (par. 103).

Back to Matthew 10, where Jesus tells us, his followers, to stop being afraid!

Jesus' instructions to his disciples prior to their first mission continue in today's gospel reading. He has been telling them about all the dangers and hardships they may have to put up with and ends by saying (in effect), "What do you expect? A disciple is not greater than his teacher. If the world gives me a bad time, it will give you one too" (Matthew 10:24-25).

So what does Jesus do? Sell them life insurance? Give them bullet-proof vests? Teach them how to diffuse conflict? Hardly. Instead he says, "Don't ever be afraid of your enemies and critics. Even though it's not obvious now, the truth will come out finally. So, speak up; shout it out; stand and deliver" (10:26-27). Well... We don't want to be heroes, especially not religious ones. It's all we can do to get to church on Sundays and we're supposed to be shouting the word of God from the housetops? No way. We're afraid.

But Jesus doesn't quit. "Stop being afraid" (that's the force of the verb); "stop being afraid" -- not just once but always. "Stop being afraid of people who can kill the body but not the soul." The point is that people can hurt us only temporarily because life comes from God. Even if they kill us, God the author of life will raise us. "Don't fear people; fear God" (the one who can kill both body and soul) (10:28).

Contrary to popular opinion, Jesus is saying that the voice of the people is not the voice of God. We worry way too much about what other people say or think of us and far too little about what God thinks of us. We know this is true. We've heard it before. But, it's easier said than done.

So what's the solution? More advice? More instruction? That's what we would expect. But Jesus is not only a teacher. He is the revelation of God, though he doesn't stop being a good teacher when he opens a window into God. He says, "Aren't sparrows the most common and cheapest bird around? Yet not one of them dies apart from God your Father" (10:29). Wow! "And what about you?" Jesus asks. "God even knows every hair on your head. So stop being afraid. You are of much more value than any sparrow" (10:30-31).

Isn't that amazing? God knows everything that we go through and nothing that happens to us escapes him. Even if we die, it doesn't happen apart from God. Even if we seem totally abandoned, even if our prayers don't seem to be answered, even if everything seems hopeless, God knows and God cares. If that's the case, we can stop being afraid.

Yet not being afraid isn't something that we can accomplish on our own. As long as we think it is, we will still be afraid -- of other people, of death, of circumstances (real or imagined). But as Jesus reveals it, we can stop being afraid because of a promise -- a

promise that God who watches over even the commonest of birds will take care of us. In simpler words, we never fall beyond the watchful eye of the Father

One more thought by way of an illustration.

Robert Frost's first assignment for a class of teachers was to read "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." This was Mark Twain's famous story about a frog that lost a jumping contest because he had been pumped full of quail shot. When the class next assembled they were mystified because they did not understand what this story had to do with a course in education.

Frost patiently explained to them that this particular story was about teachers. He said that there were two kinds of teachers. There was the kind that filled you with so much quail shot that you could not move and the kind that gave you a little prod on the behind so that you could jump to the skies. (Gary W. Houston, Cowherding Christians, CSS Publishing Company)

In truth, which one would you have your Teacher be?

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, teach me to be generous,  
teach me to serve you as you deserve,  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labor and not to seek reward,  
except that of knowing that I do your will.

St. Ignatius of Loyola

Sources: Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living; The Faith-Sharing New Testament with the Psalms; esermons; along with various other sources, all freely adapted.

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