

FATHER IN CONTROL

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Job 38:1, 8-11

Mark 4: 35-41

Today is Father's Day and I congratulate all of you who are fathers, who have them, who expect or hope to be them. Considering our text for the day and certain aspects of the role in life that we are commemorating, I am going to talk a bit about control, the art and discipline of being in control of oneself and one's life. But first, I'd like just to point out that this celebration of the father with a particular day in this country came only after we had had Mother's Day for several years. It was Julia Ward Howe who began Mother's Day after all the sons had been killed in the Civil War, and so she felt it only just and fair to celebrate the women who were left to mourn. Then a couple of generations went by and people began to say, "But what about Dad?" And now everyone is getting taken out to lunch with flowers and martinis, right? It's true that fathers receive tickets to sporting events or books about history, while mothers are more likely to get hats and gloves or cooking gear, but the acknowledgement and respect and love are not dissimilar. I only bring this up because we don't get to discuss mothers as opposed to fathers very much in this church since Mother's Day is in May when we are not in session.

Control, being in control of oneself and one's world, is a virtue that is often associated with fathers and with men, though surely these days we must see it as a woman's characteristic as well. In biblical times and certainly during the discussions of the texts that we have been reading today, women would not have had the ability to be in control, and it is something that has been at the center of the battle for gender equality over the years.

Being in control of one's life is a virtue that we admire greatly - the discipline of the athlete, the successful professional, the wise investor, the accomplished artist. And by the same token, one

of the harshest judgements that we make is on those deemed out of control in one way or another - to let your car get out of control may be a crime, to let your emotions get out of control is often embarrassing, to let your garden get out of control may even get you fined in some places, and with the mind out of control, well to call that an illness is just the beginning. Yes, we take control very seriously in our communities, and there are good reasons for that, for we are responsible people, responsible for ourselves and to one another.

We know that we cannot be responsible for everything however, and that is what our texts for today point to and what I would like to talk about with you. For people of faith, there is a particular limit to the control that they have on their lives, because, after all, the Bible states that God and Jesus have ultimate control or final authority. But even if one is not quite certain of what that faith is in, still there is a limit to the control one can have over ones own life. You are just not in charge of everything whether you are a believer or not, as witness the vast numbers of hurricanes and volcanoes, bank failures and stock market crashes that you did not cause.

So this is a struggle. These stories in the Bible describe a dicey, sometimes difficult situation where we are not sure whose life it is anyway. Who is running things? The tension is between being responsible for ones own life and having God or Jesus as the ultimate authority. And we have two stories that talk about that - one is the story of Job in the Old Testament; one is the story of Jesus stilling the storm.

With Job, we see a colossal four chapter chewing out that Job receives from God, basically saying to him, "Who do you think you are? Where were you when I created the world?" He talks to Job in detail about that kind of thing for pages and Job is brought up short, reminded that the final word is God's, no matter how strongly a person may feel about their own goodness and righteousness. Job struggles with God about authority and control, and Job loses.

Then in Mark, we hear the story of a small group of boats just crossing the sea of Galilee, at Jesus' suggestion let me point out, when a storm suddenly comes up. Now they all knew what to do in a storm - they live by the sea, they make their living there, they are sailors. Everybody was needed for doing what was needed to be done. The sails are reefed, water is bailed, the oars are put out, and everyone pulls at it. That's what people do in a storm. It says in Mark's gospel that Jesus was sleeping through it. Now that is really a miracle if he was sleeping though it, but that is what it says. Anyway, the disciple awakens him and asks him to help. "Do you not care?", they say. Instead, Jesus rebukes the storm and makes it go away. Yes, he rebukes the storm and makes it go away! The crew is filled with awe... that is not what one does in a storm. No, you reef the sails and bail the boat. You might even drown, but you don't stand up and scold the storm and send it away. These experienced sailors find that their known world is out of control. Their assumptions don't hold in the kingdom that Jesus is describing for them.

Both of these stories take place in the boundary between individual responsibility and God's authority, and they brush up against the question of whose life is this anyway and who is in control, who is in charge. Job knows for certain that he is good by his own standards. The crew knows exactly what they are supposed to do when a storm comes up - especially they know that they are not supposed to go to sleep. In each case in these biblical stories, God trumps their assumptions with greater authority. Greater power and greater priorities. And there are many stories like this in the Bible, and there are in our lives as well. When we come up against a problem with our work, with our family, with ourselves, often we feel that if we just clamp down a little bit harder, exert a little bit more of what we know has worked in the past, a little bit more of that, yes, control, then everything will be the way it should be. After all, control is the position that we should be in, isn't it?

KING OF SIAM IN THE "KING AND I" is perfect example man struggling with control issues. Explore...

I think that these stories are telling us, listening to them in the here and now, to pause and think of another way. It not that we should lie down and go to sleep in the storm, or that everything that we ever did before was wrong and we should remember that it was God that made the world. It's only this: sometimes we have had the same quarrel a hundred times and think that we can win by force of will. Sometimes we have tried to manoeuvre our way through a problem at work by exertion of power; to manage a family issue by the same argument; to change our own behavior by simply being better at doing the same thing ... and we know, we all know, that this is not always going to work. Just doing what we always do, just harder and harder, even if it is right... that is not always going to work.

We have to just step back for a while and let something else come into our mind. Maybe it will be Jesus telling the sea, "Peace! Be still!", or maybe it will be God telling Job that it is really God who is the big dude around the yard. But more likely than that, if we just take a rest from trying so hard to be in charge all the time, if we just sit back and survey the territory for a while, something new will come breezing across the fields. There is so much more wisdom available in the world, so much more wisdom that we have accumulated in our brains and our souls, that if we just take a few moments to gather it, a few breaths to make it a part of our lives, we will be able to face storms so much more valiently.

Frederick Buechner, a great contemporary Christian and author and novelist, says, "We have within us, each one of us, so much more power than we ever spend, such misers of miracles are we, such pinch-penny guardians of grace."

Now, I don't know about you, but too often I don't practice stillness. In a bad situation, I more often think that something needs to be done and done now. Well, what if we practiced stillness? I mean, just waiting a minute. We don't have to be Jesus sleeping on the deck of the storm wracked boat, but still we do not have to be charging to the heart of every storm as if it were ours to subdue. What if we claimed the power and authority to slow our own response? What if

we took stock of our situation a bit more before we acted? With the disciples, we might recognize that our situation is not as desperate as it seems; and if, saints forbid, it is that desperate--it can still be handled better by a calm, reasoned approach.

Let's just ask a question first, or say a prayer, and seek a wider answer than what it is that we are used to. When this story or parable is told in Mathew (Mathew 8: 23-27), it ends with Jesus saying to his disciples, "Why are you afraid, ye of little faith", one of the famous quotations of the Bible. "Ye of little faith" is something that we are always throwing around at one another and yet this is what we must be remembering here on Father's Day and Mother's Day too. Do not be worrying about being in control, for that just tightens up the soul. Do not be a miser of miracles... have faith, and the storm will end.

*Wade, Rev. Francis, "Whose Live Is It". 1997