

NOW IS THE TIME TO SEE GOD AS A LOVING PARENT JANUARY 24 2010
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
M. KENT MILLARD

For the past two weeks our hearts and minds have been focused on the death and suffering of the people of Haiti. We weep when we think about the deaths of an estimated 200,000 people with millions of others injured or displaced because of the loss of their homes and livelihood.

While we weep with those who weep we also rejoice with those who rejoice and are thankful for the safe return of our Haiti Mission team of Rev. Jamalyn Peigh Williamson, Gary and Kay Walla, Denise Jean-Claude and Danny, Dr. Bill Chen and Denise's son.

During a tragedy like this our view of God becomes exceedingly important. When natural disasters happen and kill thousands of people, some view God as a punishing judge or a cruel king who delights in bringing death and disaster on people. However, Jesus taught us to view God as a loving father or compassionate parent in all circumstances of life.

This past week I re-read the Sermon on the Mount to understand more clearly Jesus' image of God and it became abundantly clear that Jesus wanted us to imagine God as a loving and compassionate father or parent to all of us in all circumstances of life. In fact, there are 17 times in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus refers to God as Father. I have chosen six of those passages from the Sermon on the Mount so we might get a flavor of just how often Jesus refers to God as our compassionate Father.

This morning we are blessed to have some young people read the scripture verses which refer to God as Father from the Sermon on the Mount for us.

8:15: CHRISTIAN SMITH

9:30: JACK ROY

11:00: KELLER MELLOWITZ

Matthew 5:16

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 4:45

So that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Matthew 6:9

'Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name.

Matthew 6:26

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

Matthew 7:11

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Matthew 7:21

'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

LOOK AT THE BIRDS OF THE AIR; THEY NEITHER SOW NOR REAP AND YET YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER FEEDS THEM. ARE YOU NOT OF MORE VALUE THAN THEY?

Let us pray.

The day after the earthquake took the lives of about 200,000 people in Haiti, Rev. Pat Robertson, the televangelist and host of the 700 Club said on his television show that the earthquake hit Haiti because God had put a curse on the people of Haiti. Pat Robertson said they were cursed by God because they made a pact with the devil when they rebelled against the French government.

I was curious to find out when the Haitian people rebelled against the French government and discovered that it was 216 years ago in 1804 when the slaves and former slaves who lived in Haiti defeated French Emperor Napoleon's forces and Haiti became the first independent nation in Latin America. Haiti became independent just 28 years after the American colonists had rebelled against the British government and the United States of America was established.

But what concerned me about Rev. Robertson's statement is it portrays God primarily as a punishing God who puts curses on people and who sends earthquakes and hurricanes to punish people with whom he is displeased. A similar image of God was displayed last Monday in the Indianapolis Star when the editorial page cartoon showed a picture of devastation in Haiti and the caption overhead read "ACT OF GOD". Then there was another picture beside it of Uncle Sam reaching out to help the people caught under the debris in Haiti and it had the caption "ACT OF HUMANITY".

The image of God being portrayed by Pat Robertson and the Star cartoon is that God is a cruel and capricious God who punishes certain people by sending earthquakes to destroy men, women, and children killing young and old alike.

You see, we always live and act out of our primary image of God. If we have an image of God as a punishing judge then when an earthquake, hurricane, tornado or flood occurs we conclude that God, the punishing judge, sent that disaster to punish certain people with whom he is displeased. While that image of God is very widespread and many people believe it, the punishing judge image of God is not the primary image of God which Jesus taught.

The primary image of God revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus is that God is like a loving father or a compassionate parent.

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 to 7 is seen as a summary of the primary teachings of Jesus about God, God's relationship to us as human beings and how we should treat each other.

I was surprised to re-read the Sermon on the Mount this week and discover that Jesus calls God "Father" 17 times in those three chapters of Matthew. Young people read six of those occasions to us in the scripture this morning.

For example, Jesus said: LET YOUR LIGHT SHINE BEFORE OTHERS, SO THAT THEY MAY SEE YOUR GOOD WORKS AND GIVE GLORY TO YOUR FATHER IN HEAVEN.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray and Jesus said when you pray say: OUR FATHER (not our punishing judge or our cruel king) WHO ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME. Jesus said we should all call God "Our Father." Jesus also said: LOOK AT THE BIRDS OF THE AIR; THEY NEITHER SOW NOR REAP NOR GATHER INTO BARNES, AND YET YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER FEEDS THEM. ARE YOU NOT OF MORE VALUE THAN THEY?

All of these images of God portray a God who is like a loving heavenly father who sees all people as his children, calls on all of them to pray to him as a loving father who cares what happens to them just as God cares what happens to the birds of the air and all the rest of creation. It is clear that Jesus came to change a common misconception about God. In the teachings of Jesus, God is not a cruel and capricious dictator but a loving and compassionate father or creator of all humanity who cares about all of his children wherever they live in the world. Just as we human parents love and care for our children, so God loves and cares for all humanity because we are all ultimately children of one Creator God.

This morning we have the privilege of baptizing 11 children. I have a chance to visit with each of the parents before the service of baptism and I always experience their deep love for their children and their great gratitude to God for these children. This last week one mother of recently born twins said to me with tears in her eyes: "How can I ever possibly express my great gratitude to God for the gift of these beautiful babies? I told her that she expresses her gratitude to God every time she lovingly cares for the children God has given her and her husband and they will learn about God's unconditional love for them first through her unconditional love for them. Loving and compassionate parents care for their children deeply, want the best for them, and do everything they can to help their children grow to be all God created them to be. The bond between loving parents and their children is so great that when a child suffers the parents suffer alongside them.

When I visit sick children in the hospital I see parents who often say, "I wish I could take this pain myself so they wouldn't have to suffer like this." Loving parents don't inflict pain and suffering on their children; rather, when pain and suffering come into their children's lives as it inevitably does, they feel that pain and do all they can to alleviate it.

In a similar way, Jesus tells us that is how God feels about us. God cares about all humanity and when God's children suffer from the affects of earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, or other natural disasters, God is like a loving parent who suffers alongside his children and seeks to help them through their times of suffering.

When that earthquake hit Haiti last week and 200,000 of God's precious children were killed, God's tears were the first to fall. God feels the pain when his children suffer anywhere in the world. God inspires compassion in the hearts of God's other children like us to reach out in loving and compassionate ways to help those who have lost almost everything.

I would like to call your attention to the picture on the screen behind me. You will see that it is a picture of Rev. Dave and Rev. Jamalyn Williamson taken a few years ago when they were working with orphans in Haiti. You can see that Dave and Jamalyn are surrounded by these orphans and they are holding their own daughter, Margaret.

In that picture, Dave and Jamalyn represent the love of God for these children. God reaches out and embraces all of these orphaned children through the loving, tender care of Dave and Jamalyn and all those other compassionate people in the world who give time, talent, treasure and love to little children who have no one else to love them and care for them.

God does not send earthquakes to destroy children like this. God is in the middle of all the children of the earth just as Dave and Jamalyn are in the middle of these children in need giving them love and care.

Earthquakes occur because we live on a planet where natural forces of gravity and shifting of plates deep in the earth takes place for reasons we don't fully understand nor can accurately predict even with our most sophisticated measuring instruments. When that shifting of the earth takes place and people suffer, God, our loving Creator, suffers along with us just as caring parents suffer alongside their suffering children.

Last week Rev. Stan Abell made a brief interview video with Rev. Jamalyn Williamson about her experience last week in Haiti. I'd like to show it to you so you can get a better understanding about what happened with our team in Haiti. This video is on u-tube if you want to share it with others.

The Fondwa orphanage and school is supported by a group of Roman Catholic nuns and by the Family Health Services organization with headquarters in North Carolina which is how Dave and Jamalyn became involved in this ministry in Haiti. After Dave and Jamalyn graduated from Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina they served two years in Fondwa, Haiti as missionaries in caring for those who had lost their parents and teaching in the orphanage.

At the Fondwa orphanage there was a Roman Catholic Haitian novice named Sister Oudel who was 22 years old and was in the process of becoming a Roman Catholic nun. Two years ago a baby boy named Jude was born in Fondwa and his mother died two days after he came into the world.

Baby Jude was brought to the Fondwa orphanage and Sister Oudel took him under her wing. He lived with Sister Oudel in a little house with other nuns and she took care of him. She fed him, she changed his diapers, she played with him, and she loved him. She was like a mother to him.

When the earthquake hit Fondwa, Oudel was in her room at the little house taking care of 2 year-old Jude. The house completely collapsed into a pile of rubble on top of them and Sister Oudel and the little boy she loved like he was her own son, were both killed.

Jamalyn told me that it took hours for the workers at the orphanage to dig through the rubble with their bare hands to find the bodies of Sister Oudel and Jude. There is a casket maker in Fondwa so they were able to secure a casket and a couple of days after the earthquake, Rev. Jamalyn Williamson conducted a funeral service for Oudel and Jude. They put the baby Jude into the arms of Sister Oudel in the casket so they could spend eternity together. After Jamalyn conducted the funeral service, they carried the casket about an hours walk up a hill where they were buried in a mountain top cemetery overlooking the beautiful mountains of central Haiti.

I found it touching to imagine a young woman choosing to be a Catholic nun, imagining that she would never get married and have children of her own. Then, she was given the blessing of having an orphaned boy given to her as if he were her own son for two years. She must have felt that as a blessing from God. And now, they will spend eternity together.

Sister Oudel also demonstrates what the love of God is like. God loves each of God's children and cares for them in his arms, just the way Sister Oudel took an orphaned child into her loving care. Sister Oudel cared so much she gave her life while caring for Jude and in a similar way God cares so much for all of us that he gave his life in Jesus Christ while caring for all of humanity.

Whenever you lose a loved one, whenever you encounter critical illness, whenever you go through a divorce or loss of a job or any other painful event in life, I hope you will imagine that God is with you, strengthening you, loving you, and wrapping his arms around you through the loving people who walk with you through this difficult time.

Whenever any of us face difficult times in our lives I hope we will remember that image of God that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount where he says that just as God cares about every bird of the air so God cares even more for every one of his children on earth.

My prayer is that each of us will experience God as a loving Heavenly Father, a compassionate eternally present parent who surrounds us with his loving presence in every moment of life. You see, God is always present around us in every moment of life- in this very moment of life- giving us love and compassion no matter what trials or difficulties we may face in our lives.

The message that comes to me through the tragic earthquake in Haiti is that God's tears were the first to fall when all those people lost their lives and God is responding to this tragedy by sending loving compassionate people from all over the world to help our Haitian brothers and sisters rebuild their lives after this devastation.

Our closing hymn has these words of comfort and assurance in our times of need:

WHEN THE STORMS OF LIFE ARE RAGING, STAND BY ME. WHEN THE WORLD IS TOSSING ME, LIKE A SHIP UPON THE SEA, THOU WHO RULEST WIND AND WATER STAND BY ME.

Sometimes you may feel like the world is tossing me like a ship upon the sea but even in the midst of feeling tossed about and suffering, we know that God will stand beside us to guide us, love us and support us like the loving Heavenly Father that Jesus talked about and demonstrated in his own life.

Let us pray.