

FEAR, FAITH AND FEELINGS
Sermon for Pentecost 3, Proper 7B: Mk 4:35-41
LPC, 6/21/09

No Fathers Day would be complete without a Father story. When I was a little girl, I could always depend on protection from my father. I know I am not unique in this. I also know that my experience is not universal. There are plenty of people whose fathers were not reliable, and who could not be depended upon for protection, but my own father was always there for me, and always a strong defense against the monsters in my closet or in my dreams. I cannot think of a single fear I came up with that my father did not help me stand against.

I remember standing beside my father in church. My father, bless him, had a “remarkable” singing voice. He had a good musical sense, and could play several instruments, but his singing voice was not beautiful. However, he always sang the hymns with gusto and from this I learned something else about standing up to fear. My father taught me never to fear being heard to praise God.

Our parents certainly have a profound influence over what and when and why we fear, and we carry this influence with us throughout our lives. But even having an apparently fearless father does not protect people from developing fears of all sorts.

There are phobias, those exaggerated and irrational fears that result in neurotic behavior: acrophobia, the fear of heights; agoraphobia, the fear of open or public spaces.... I myself suffer from a mild claustrophobia, or a fear of closed spaces, although in my own case it is not the closed space per se that concerns me as much as the idea of being unable to get out of a space. I need an escape route, in other words.

Besides phobias, people carry around articulate or inarticulate fears: fear of failure, fear of abandonment, fear of being in want, fear of embarrassment. Some psychiatrists say that all fears are ultimately a fear of death, but I think fear of death also points to something beyond itself. No one really knows what death means, after all. Fear of death can thus be said to be a fear of the unknown. But even fear of the unknown suggests a still deeper root fear. Can it not be said that all fears ultimately stem from the fear of losing control? Isn't that why the fear of fear itself is so real to many of us?

Fear, of course, is an emotion. As such it is difficult to control. Biologists will tell us that fear performs a useful function in the organism, inciting the impulse to fight or flee, actions that, depending on the circumstances, can be expected to defend or preserve a person's life. But because fear itself threatens a person with loss of control, many of us learn not to face our fears head on. And, as psychology tells us, suppressed emotions lead to neurosis or other personality problems.

Obviously the thing to do is not be afraid in the first place, but that is easier said than done. Telling someone not to be afraid is often a little like telling someone not to sweat when it's hot, or not to bleed when they're cut. What we need is a strategy for what to do when we do feel afraid.

Obviously, when we do feel afraid, we should face our fears and not pretend they're not there. Fear can be a useful tool. At the very least fear is a way of our souls and bodies saying, "Something's wrong!" We can't fix the something wrong, or run away from it or fight it, unless we face the fear, or at least know where and what it is.

The Bible is full of admonitions to not be afraid. Angels who are conveying messages from God to people are always saying, "Fear not!" And in today's gospel story from Mark, the disciples are chastised for fearing a plainly catastrophic storm that, seasoned seamen as they are, threatens to kill them at sea. "Why are you afraid?" Jesus asks them, which given the circumstances, let's face it, is a stupid question. "Have you still no faith?"

What this story meant to the disciples, and what it meant to Mark's original audience, is that having faith will combat fear. This is a message to us too, when we are afraid. Know this: Jesus is in the boat. (He has not left the building.) Jesus, the Lord of Love, is stronger than wind or wave, or closed or open spaces, or embarrassment or hatred, or even, God help us, those situations when we are not in control. We don't have to be in control. Jesus is. He proved this by overcoming the ultimate loss-of-control, death itself. That is the message we are to take from this. Have faith: know that Jesus is in control when you're not. And also, incidentally, when you think you are.

Now I've had people tell me, "I know I ought to have faith, but I just don't *feel* it." Ah yes. Feelings. We live in a feelings-saturated culture. To be entertained, for the most part, we need our feelings manipulated by media. And boy, does media oblige. Advertisers manipulate our desires. Movies, TV programs, and computer communications manipulate our sympathies and prejudices. Even news broadcasts are not immune from this.

Even ... religious "experts" are not immune to this. Religion today has become something to make us *feel* good, through such products as "Chicken Soup for the Human Soul," or a touching story making the rounds on email. A steady diet of this convinces us that if we don't *feel* mushy inside God isn't present. Religion for many becomes mere sentiment, rather than a means by which God is redeeming the universe.

Now I've said that fear must be heeded, and this is true of all emotions. Feelings are valuable. Feelings give us essential information. But feelings are not the whole truth.

When people are fearful and know they need to have faith but don't *feel* like it, it may help to know that the Bible pays very little attention to feelings, but spends quite a lot of ink on the idea of *faithfulness*. If "having faith" is not a meaningful concept given how we feel, we can concentrate rather on "being faithful." In other words, stay in the boat. Keep going. Say your prayers. Ask for help. At the very least the use of familiar forms can calm the panic long enough to give a person time to think constructively.

So, especially when fearful, say your prayers. The disciples thought they were going to drown, but had just enough presence of mind to appeal to Jesus. It worked for them. It still works.