

## **“Our Father in Heaven”, based on Gal. 3:23-4:7, David Jahnke, 6/20/10**

Today I will continue on our journey of grace and judgment; a journey which finally can only be navigated rightly in the ethical waters of our lives by the Spirit of God. Principles, while helpful, are no match for a devotion to prayer.

Someone recently lifted up a book which played with this image of a boat on a lake. The author said we can either try to row our way to “our” destination on the other side of the lake, (often times with the wind blowing against us.) Or we can put up a sail and put our hand on the rudder through prayer and study and fellowship and let the Spirit of God guide and power us to our true destination.

Principles and rules, while a kind of compass, cannot finally steer, much less power us where we need to go. And regardless, the boat of our bodies and minds has holes in it. We are only able to stay afloat and sail in the right direction by way of the Spirit who floated over chaotic waters at the beginning of creation and walked on stormy waters in the fullness of time.

The church member who read the book spoke of what a revelation this was; that he had been rowing and rowing for years, especially when it came to church work. But in the last year or two since he started letting go of the oars and putting up the sail, things have started to shift; especially in his perception of how church can really work and his role in the church.

I read a Chekhov quote the other day on a Baptist church in the city the other day, “Any idiot can make it through a crisis; it is day to day living that wears you out.” Crises are not fun and we all know that. But we make it through them, generally speaking.

I think daily living really wears us out because we think things are up to us. Because we want control. Because we are convinced of how things *must be* and we have principles to back us up. So we get frustrated by those in the boat who won’t row at the same time as us; or who don’t know how to row; or refuse to row; or even dare to row in the opposite direction of us!

Paul speaks of the basic principles of the world— they do guard and guide us. They teach and provide order; they motivate and caution. But Paul also says that they are enslaving. They are a constant disciplinarian over us. They bring debilitating shame and guilt over wrong-doing. They bring anxiety over whether we were right or wrong to say this or do that; and insecurity about what others think of our words or actions. They bring worry over future wrong-doing and can paralyze us with the fear of messing up, especially when principles and the judgment which comes with them become the determinants of behavior. On top of all of this, we extend the legalistic, moralistic cloud over others, bringing them down. And furthering our frustration because others do not cooperate with our will!

So Paul writes of an alternative to the Law and self-determination-- the true freedom which comes with Christ who introduces to the world faith in God and life empowered by the Spirit.

“Now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian...God sent his Son, born under the law, <sup>5</sup>in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ”

“Now that faith has come.” Paul calls Jesus faith! Christ came and concretely revealed truth, mercy and healing in all his actions; he fulfilled the Law for us; he died on the cross to assure us of forgiveness; and he rose from the grave to assure us of eternal life. Everything about Jesus is God’s gift to the world that everything has been taken care of. Jesus is the gift of faith that allows us to trust God completely and have no fear.

I got to thinking about how all of this relates to accountability and discipline. When we are young, our parents, if they are doing their job, are responsible for disciplining us— teaching us right from wrong. But good parents know that the message about right and wrong will not enter in unless there is a foundation of unconditional love. Without an abundance of love and grace, discipline is easily twisted into a message that the child is bad or stupid or lazy or mean. A protective shell comes up around the child to defend them from the negativity. But this also prevents teaching from entering in. When children know that their parents’ love is unchangeable; when praise outweighs negative teaching tenfold as it ought— then everything changes. Then their hearts and minds are open and they learn not only what they should not do but why they should not do it. And more importantly, they learn what they can do; the great things they are capable of!

This is how it is with our Father in heaven. He does hold us accountable and he does want to fill us with righteousness. But he also knows that his teachings will not enter in if we have a protective, defensive shell around us which fears reproach and punishment. This is why he sent his Son into the world--- to make absolutely sure that there is no doubt in our mind of God's love and mercy. And he sent the Spirit into the church to carry on this same message from generation to generation and that is our purpose.

Because when there is no doubt of God's love and care for all of creation, then we are actually opened up to hear the truth about ourselves and the world; and we are empowered to live by the Spirit according to God's truth. Paul sums it by saying that God sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' We are no longer slaves but children of God; and if children then heirs. Heirs of the Kingdom which then comes alive all around us even in the midst of this broken world; heirs of the gifts and all of the fruits of the Spirit which make all things right for us.

Here is another way of looking at it. It's graduation time...which means that within a few months most graduates will enter into a new stage of even greater independence. For around 18 years, they have been guarded and to a certain degree imprisoned by the discipline of their parents. They have pretty well learned right and wrong; and that they would be punished for breaking the rules. But if they have not come to trust in and receive the Spirit of Love and truth which underlies all of the discipline, what will keep them from straying...when worldly temptations abound and the guardians are not around?

In fact, it hit me last night that there is a real danger in this largely secular part of the country— that the church is becoming a kind of divine enforcer or reinforcement of moral life. If we go to church just to provide our kids with a divine framework for moral living, we are dead in the water, to return to original metaphor. Our children will see right through the spiritlessness of this and the boat will be stuck in the middle of the lake.

We need renewal; we need to open up our hearts and let the Spirit of God enter in and cry out, "Abba Father." We need to not be ashamed of our utter dependence upon God. We need teach and show our children that it is the Spirit of Christ in our hearts which guides and empowers us.

And by the way, while the context of this Sunday has brought this all to my consciousness...there is no finger-pointing going on. I do not doubt in the least that our parents have made love priority #1 and this is essential and to their credit. And I am actually a prime example of someone who strayed quite far but whom God never abandoned.

I was listening to NPR the other day and heard a story about the Sufi sect of Islam. An English scholar named William Dalrymple dared to call the Sufi texts a kind of the New Testament of Islam; that the legalistic strains of the Koran were softened and graced by the Sufi philosophers and poets' focus on Love as the unifying presence which must guide and fill all of life. And this recognition seems to have freed them from the binds of Islamic Law-- just as Paul says God's Spirit frees us from the curse of the Law— the chains of guilt, judgment and the fear of punishment.

And for the Sufis, this mystical philosophy revolving around love has flowered into a gentle Spirit— and the creation of beautiful poetry, art and dance.

This flowering and even more is what I want for all of our children. I want them to be freed from the fear of failure or judgment. I want them to be certain of a love and a power deep within their hearts that will never end; not even when they die. I want them to live, not just according to the rules but by God's powerful Spirit of goodness, love and hope. And in so doing, I want them to enjoy in this life and forevermore the fruits and gifts of a life overflowing with the Spirit of God. So to the one who can do far more abundantly in us than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations. And God's people say...Amen