

Melanie Rosa  
Lakewood UMC

Taking God Seriously

Matthew 17:14-20  
May 18, 2008

I cannot help but feel a bit wistful today as I look at our 8 High School Graduates and consider how quickly they have grown up, right before our eyes. I baptized some of them and remember them as children. We have had the great privilege of sharing life with them and having most of them actively involved in our church over the years, and that means so much.

When I realized that I have known some of them since they were 4 or 5 years old I was shocked. They are all such fine human beings and they give me great hope for the future of our world. Their world is dramatically different world from the one we older folks inhabit. Do you realize that today's class of 2008 has always had the Disney Channel and Comedy Channel on Television? Don't even try to tell them about the time when there were just 3 channels on TV and you had to actually get up off the couch to change them! They would not believe you, anyway.

The class of 2008 cannot remember when Martha Stewart was not cooking on television or a time when there was not a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. They never lived without voice mail, computers have always had viruses, they probably did all of their college shopping online. They all know people who are gay, and their generation is much more accepting and tolerant of diversity. And most amazing of all--Bert and Ernie from Sesame Street, are old enough to be their parents. It gives one pause to consider the world today's High School Graduates live in.

Today's Scripture lesson is another one of those miraculous healings for which Jesus was notorious. A man comes to him with an epileptic son. In those days everybody believed that epilepsy was the result of demon possession, so there was great stigma attached. This young man could not control himself, he would fall into fires and raging rivers, thrashing and drooling and groaning. There appeared to be no help anywhere for him. His father asked the followers of Jesus to heal him, but they could not. In desperation he turns to Jesus himself and begs, "Please Lord, have mercy upon my son and heal him." And Jesus does just that. The disciples seem irritated that Jesus does this so effortlessly, asking him, "Now why couldn't we do that ourselves?" Jesus says, "Because you are not taking God seriously. You did not believe you could do it. If you have just a little faith as small as a mustard or as some versions say, poppy seed, you could move mountains."

"You are not taking God seriously." That statement probably stopped them dead in their tracks. But it was true of the disciples and it is true of us. We

believe in God and even love God, but we do not always take God seriously.

If we did, our lives would be dramatically different. If we did we would think about ourselves less and others much more. If we did we would understand that we are here for a reason, to be a blessing in this world in whatever ways we possibly can until we die. When we take God seriously we discover that we have potential and possibility that we never dreamed we had. We find hope and strength and peace. We find that within us are seeds of greatness and goodness. There is no telling what power can be unleashed upon this world when we start to take God seriously and allow God to work in and through us.

But I confess that I often take myself more seriously than God. My reality and my concerns quickly become the center of the universe. Whatever is happening in my life becomes the most important thing of all. And if there is a problem, then I need to fix it. It's all up to me. Someone once sent me a card which read, "DO NOT FEEL TOTALLY AND PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR EVERYTHING. THAT'S MY JOB. GOD." Taking God seriously means that we first and foremost realize we are not God, and we are not responsible for everything that happens. There is a greater power and wisdom available to us all the time.

A man once boarded a bus carrying a briefcase that was obviously very heavy. He stumbled up the steps of the bus and found there were no seats available, so he just grabbed onto the pole beside the driver with one hand, and with the other hand he continued to hold the heavy briefcase. He seemed afraid to set it down. Finally after a sudden stop when he nearly lost his footing altogether, the driver turned around and said, "It's now safe for you to let the bus carry your briefcase." How often do we lug around heavy loads because we don't trust any one else to help carry them for us, most of all God? Carrying them all by ourselves is neither healthy nor necessary. A while back I read about a young mother who taught her children to pray. She asked them to pray for their friend Emma, a girl with pancreatic cancer who had been given just a year to live. She asked her kids what they wanted to pray for. So her oldest son said, "God please help Emma and give her a miracle." Then her 6 year old son said, "God please don't let Emma hurt too much." Then the oldest boy then said, "God, don't let her family be too sad." Not wanting to be outdone, the younger son finally said, "OK God, you'd better handle this because nobody else can handle it by themselves."

There is so much in this world that nobody can handle by themselves. We all need help, all the time. There are times when we all confront situations and circumstances we absolutely cannot handle, as recent disasters have so vividly

demonstrated. There are times when we not explanations or resources or words, and at that point we need to let God take over. It is often only at the point of our own weakness and helplessness and confusion that we realize how powerless we really are and how much we need God.

Robert Raines wrote, "To be human is to be vulnerable. Survival sometimes requires feeling safe, even when we do not realize it. Remember that old Gospel Hymn "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms, safer and secure from all alarms? I never realized how much that Hymn meant to me until I understood my own need for safety, sanctuary, shelter that only God can give. There is a time for restoring the soul, waiting for strength to be renewed. The longer you live the more you realize that you do not have all the answers, a solution for every problem, a cure for every illness. You realize that you cannot always take care of yourself. Trying to take care of yourself is like trying to sit in your own lap. You need so much more than you could ever provide for yourself."

It is amazing how much we value self-sufficiency in our culture, when our faith teaches us that self-sufficiency is really an illusion. We need each other more than we would ever admit, in both good times and bad. Ralph Sockman said, "One of the tragic blunders of life is to think we are in control of our destinies. Usually we are standing in our own way. We must get out of our own way in order to get to others, and we must get out of our own way in order to get to God." Sometimes surrender is our only option, giving up and letting go.

A long distance Olympic swimmer was once asked how she could endure the endless hours in the cold water. She said, "I always think of the water as my friend, I never fight it. I know that it will support me, and so I do not struggle against it." If only we could think of God in the same way, as our supporter and friend, providing the spiritual sustenance we need. And speaking of Olympic swimmers, do you remember Amy Van Dyken from Englewood, who won 6 Gold Medals, 4 of them in the 1996 Olympics? She was the first woman ever to do so. In an speech following her incredible showing that year, she said, "This is a victory for all of the nerds out there." She told of how she was belittled in school, how she struggled with asthma and could not keep up with other kids. How she was teased for being 6 feet tall. But some compassionate people reached out and nurtured her. They saw her incredible potential. She said, "For all the kids out there who are unpopular and slow and struggling, I hope I am an inspiration. If they keep plugging along, find people who support them and never loose sight of their dreams, something good will come."

I would only add, if you take God seriously, something good will come. Because you will understand that you are here for a reason, to fulfill God's

purposes for your life in this world.

What seeds of potential lie within you? What special gifts do you possess that could bless and change this world? Are there words that you need to say, things you need to do, abilities you have to share? If you have just a little bit of faith, incredible things can happen in and through you.

"Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord" wrote the Psalmist. When you trust you are blessed, no matter what happens to you in this life. You can set your burden down and let God carry it for awhile.

As I was preparing for a very tragic funeral last week I came across the words from Romans Chapter 8. Words I read at nearly every funeral, but words which were presented in a unique and refreshing way in The Message.

"What can separate us from the love of God? What could drive a wedge between us and God? Not trouble or hard times, not distress or persecution, not hunger or homelessness, or the worst sins imaginable. Nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, nothing in all creation can ever separate us from the embrace of God's love that we find in Jesus Christ."

Today I invite all of us to remember that are upheld and supported in more ways than we will ever know. Let us resolve in the days ahead to take God more seriously, so that God may embrace this world through us. Amen.