

“Siblinghood and Solidarity”
Hebrews 2:10-18
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A few years ago, one Sunday in Advent, I preached a sermon in which I told the story of my mother’s prowess as the finder of the perfect Christmas gift. Word spread, and so when my brother and sister learned that I had shared about my mother and that they might be fair game for sermon material, they were seized with the fear of God that I might tell stories on them too. And so during the subsequent phone call, when they had pleaded for mercy, and when I had extracted from them what I wanted, I allayed their fears and informed them that they were not, in fact, the subject of any upcoming sermons. Of course, that was several years ago now... That they have become the introduction to this one, however, will remain our little secret right?

Now, it is clearly not the kind of stories whose revelation my siblings fear that make me sure that when the author of Hebrews says that “Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters,” he cannot possibly be talking about me and my siblings. And beyond that, I also know that this Biblical language of children of God, and flesh and blood, and brothers and sisters, is not employed to speak about the emotional bonds of family members. But if my own experience with siblings is at all like that of other families, and it probably is, this language is useful in helping us to more fully understand something about what it means to say that

Jesus was fully human, an affirmation that is at the heart of both the Bible and the church's historic creeds.

The best way to work on an important passage like one is from the back to the front, from the conclusion to the introduction. The punchline is that Jesus Christ is the faithful and merciful high priest who, by his own blood, makes the final sacrifice that takes away our sins and make us "at one" with God. It is all related to the Old Testament traditions of atonement and sacrificing animals and splattering blood on the altar, and the author will explain all this in more detail later in the book but that is not our concern tonight. In tonight's passage, he is presenting Jesus' credentials for his high priesthood by saying that only by Jesus becoming "like us in every respect," including suffering, was he capable of being that high priest and getting done the job of our salvation. The case is being made that only someone of the same flesh and blood could perform the sacrifice since the sacrifice was to remove the sin of humans. But the only human being up for the task is the son of God, whom the father made perfect for the job by making him able to share everything with us. It is our siblinghood with Jesus Christ that makes all the difference in his duty as high priest, and his solidarity with humanity that makes all the difference in the world.

There is something you should know about the word perfect as it is used here. This is not perfect in the sense of a flawless diamond, or faultless moral character. This is perfect in the sense of completeness, of fulfilling the last

requirement. Jesus is not simply labeled perfect and it is not his moral purity which qualifies him to be the high priest for us. Instead, God makes him perfect by making him one of us. For the author of Hebrews, the reason for the incarnation is the “perfection” of Christ as a brother with all of humanity. It seems like a fairly tidy little package but there is a greater purpose behind it than for us to see Jesus as a member of the family. The whole incarnation thing, the baby Jesus in the manger, the calling of fishers of men, the temptation in the wilderness, the hanging upon a cross, -- all of this has been done for one purpose: so that we might be brought to glory, freed from slavery to the fear of death.

That is pretty strong language -- freed from slavery to the fear of death --and it needs some unpacking. It is perhaps the most common of human experiences to be afraid of the unknown, and death certainly falls in that category, and to fear death on that basis is to be expected. After all, death is a part of life. But I do not think this is what Hebrews suggests we’ve been freed from. Instead, I think that what we’ve been freed from is being stopped in our tracks by the fear of the unknownness of death, freed from being paralyzed and unable to live for fear of dying. Friends, it is one thing to say we are afraid of death and quite another to live under the boot of the fear of death. It is like the difference between being afraid we might choke to death on a piece of meat and refusing to eat meat at all because we might choke to death! One requires caution, the other paralysis.

And so I want to go a little further and suggest that the fear from which we

are freed is not simply the fear of being dead, or even the fear of what might await us after death. No, we are freed from the fear of death in whatever form death might take! Let me say that again: we are freed from the fear of death in whatever form death might take! For each of us, the kind of death we fear, that is, what each of us considers “death”, may be quite different. Some might fear actual death, but for some death might be living in poverty or paralysis, or without the ability to think or speak clearly. For others it might be living apart from family, or not having meaningful employment, or not being important. If you take the sentence, “I’d rather be dead than blank,” what you end that sentence with is, for you, even worse than death.

But let me push you still further and suggest that of all the things we fear, the greatest fear, and perhaps what underlies all of our other fears, is the fear that in the end, “I don’t matter,” that my life is of no consequence, that my passing from this earth will not even be noticed, no one will remember me, no one will clear the weeds from my grave. I had a friend who drove for a limousine company and who was occasionally called upon to drive the hearse for the local funeral home. He told me once that the saddest thing he had ever experienced was attending a funeral to which no one came - not family, not friends, not neighbors. The woman he drove to the church and then on to the cemetery had literally no one who knew or cared that she had died. Almost everyone to whom I have ever told this story goes away deeply saddened and I think it is because they recognize that

in that story lies *their* greatest fear: that no one will love them to the end.

It's a sobering thought, isn't it? But if this is truly our greatest fear, it still has no power where God is concerned for we have been freed from the fear of that kind of death also in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. You see, what happens with Jesus' incarnation is that God is saying something like this: "I love you. I love you so much that I am willing to become one of you, to live like one of you, to suffer like one of you, to be your brother, all to show you that you do matter, all to make it possible for you to live out from under the blanket of fear! If you didn't matter, I would have stayed up in heaven, watched you toil under the sun, popped another universe-sized bob-bon in my mouth and laughed at the trembling in your voice when you vainly prayed to me for a sign of my existence. But I've been among you and I know what it's like to suffer, I know what it's like to be in pain, I know what it's like to be afraid. And I don't want you to have to live that way." This is what siblinghood and solidarity are all about. And then life begins.

You see, at the moment of our recognition of being a child of God, of being a brother or sister of Christ, is when life begins. It is the point at which we realize that to fear anyone or anything, including death, is to give that person, or that thing, a higher place in our lives than God. The great Christian mystic Howard Thurman puts it this way: "He who fears is literally delivered to destruction. But to the child of God, however...even the threat of violence, with the possibility of death that it carries, is recognized for what it is -- merely the threat of violence

with a death potential. Such a man recognizes that death cannot possibly be the worst thing in the world. There are some things that are worse than death. To deny one's own integrity of personality in the presence of the human challenge is one of those things." For Howard Thurman, who knew something about fear as he grew up black in the South in the early part of last century, the integrity of one's personality comes from the siblinghood of Jesus Christ and is the gift of God which makes all the difference in the lives of those who have every reason to fear. To deny that gift is to deny God and to give glory to someone or something undeserving.

The incarnation, the living and suffering and death of Jesus Christ is what delivers us to give to God what God deserves, the glory and honor which ought to be given to no one, and no thing. And this is what makes the person of faith "dangerous," for the most dangerous person in the world, more dangerous even than any terrorist, is the one who fears nothing but God. This is a person whose faith is not shaken by the loss of anything, who does not fear losing family, wealth, status, or reputation, *but* who is also not willing to lose the integrity of life and the dignity that God has given him or her as a child of God. Please do not misunderstand me. By dangerous, I do not mean to connote violence, or causing harm to people, but dangerous to the status quo, to the powers that be, to the fear that circulates throughout the world, dangerous in the sense of unpredictability, willingness to take risks, unafraid of rejection. This is the faith of Gandhi, Mother

Teresa, Martin Luther King. It is the faith to which we are called, faith lived dangerously.

Let me give a little definition to this idea, literally. The English word danger is related to everything we've been talking about in this way: the word danger comes from the Middle English which comes from the Old French which goes back to the Vulgar Latin and the Latin word behind it all is *dominium*, having to do with ownership and sovereignty and power, and related to the Latin word *dominus*, or lord and master. As we know the word "danger" now, meaning something like exposure to harm or injury, it has lost some of the meaning it once had, but that older sense is related to being under the jurisdiction of a greater power, or within the reach of a lord or master. What "danger" really means then is something like this: If I say "I am in danger of falling off that cliff" what I am really saying is that "I am within the jurisdiction of gravity, or I'm within the reach of death or disability, or at least of losing my balance." At the very least, danger connotes being under the control of something not yourself. And so, when I say that we are called to live a dangerous faith, I don't necessarily mean that we are to put ourselves in harm's way for the sake of the gospel, though that might happen. What I do mean is that we are called always to be in the reach of God and under God's authority in everything we do. And what enables us to be dangerous is knowing that God loves us, living in the truth that Christ has freed us from the fear of death, and never turning our backs on the dignity that is found only in God.

I'm sure I've made living a dangerous faith sound like a daunting task, and it is. But that should not deter you from giving it a try. It's simple really: just live your life in utter dependence on God and everything will be OK! Now that will really deter you. But seriously, it is the same siblinghood and solidarity that freed us from the fear of death that offers us community so that we do not have to try to live a dangerous faith alone. We are called to siblinghood with one another, and to solidarity with the whole world. May God grant this church and all its members those qualities in abundance and may it live faith dangerously as the heart, hands, and voice of Jesus Christ. Amen.