

COMPETENCE, CONFIDENCE, AND FAITH

Sermon for June 20, 2021

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Mark 4: 35 – 41; 1 Samuel 17: 1-7, 32-50; 2 Corinthians 6: 3-10

As sons reflect on what they have received from their father, they often think about practical matters. In ages past, many sons learned their trades from watching their fathers at work. They learned to understand their place in the world from this, and they saw their pursuit of earthly contentment with reference to competence in the skills their fathers taught them. In modern times, with life having become as complicated as it has, a son knows, typically, almost nothing about how his father earns a living; however, a son often learns lessons that might be described as “practical” from his father – basics about automobile maintenance, household repairs, and lawn care and, in addition perhaps, useful guidance in recreational activities. In typical family dynamics, the father-figure presents a model of competence in dealing with problems posed by the material world. The mother-figure, in typical family dynamics, presents a model of patience, nurturing care, and abiding faith. You probably remember Norman Rockwell’s painting for the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* that depicts a mother and children in their Sunday best going off to church as the man of the house, still in pajamas and bathrobe, glances defensively at them from where he slouches in an easy chair.

Models and concepts of typicality are of limited value in understanding actual specific cases, of course. In fact, you can probably think of more than one case in which a family operated in a quite untypical manner, with a mother who did the practical problem-solving and a father who supplied the children with faith and inspiration. But consideration of what a child in the archetypal family receives from his or her parents provides us with insight into how individuals develop confidence that they are able to achieve competence and, also, contentment in their lives. And the idea that achievement of balance in the development of confidence occurs to us – a balance of cold appreciation of material realities on the one hand, and, on the other, warm appreciation of a nurturing presence.

One of the reasons that the story of David and Goliath was fascinating to us as children – especially fascinating, I suppose, for boys – is that it turns upside-down, in its symbolism, a child’s idea that in order to meet the challenges of life it is necessary to undergo a transformation, leaving behind the identity of childhood and taking on the identity of a grown-up. David eschews the symbolic armor and sword, which would signify his reaching for competence as modeled by a male grown-up, and insists upon a child’s identity. There is, of course, logic behind his going to fight Goliath armed only with a sling and five stones, since as a shepherd boy he has prevailed over wild predators. Nevertheless, the symbolism conveys its own message: A boy remains a boy as he goes out to do battle with a monumental model of adult competence. (We can all remember, I imagine, when merely human adults seemed gigantic to us.) Instead of learned and hard-earned competence derived from experience in warfare, faith goes out to the field of battle with David. He declares, “The Lord who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will save me from the hand of this Philistine.” It may seem that we are presented with inconsistency in trying to account for David’s confidence: Is he confident because of his history of victories over wild animals or because of his faith in God? In trying to answer the question, we may need to remind ourselves that confidence grounded on faith is qualitatively different from confidence grounded on a record of competence – though

confidence of the two kinds may be synchronously operative and congruent in effect; that whereas confidence grounded on a record of competence is dependent upon material evidence, confidence grounded in faith does not depend upon such experience.

It may well be that we sincerely believe that faith is stronger than experience as a source of confidence, but that we are inclined to leave the account of how David defeated Goliath on the page, in mere words, and not want to take its substance with us into our own world, the world in which we must, protecting our sense of balance, manage to live. The story of David and Goliath may feel to us like the story of Jack and the Beanstalk – a story for a child’s entertainment. The perspective expressed by the Apostle Paul may come to mind – the familiar passage in which Paul says, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (1 *Corinthians* 13: 11). But let’s consider the perspective Paul took into the world as it is reflected in our reading today from *Second Corinthians*: “[A]s servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying and yet we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.” Paul was able to face, and face again and again, terrible material actuality’s because he took with him into his world non-material resources: recognition of the presence of the Holy Spirit, faith in divine care, commitment to righteousness, and enduring love. The story of how Paul faced his world and prevailed is no less a miracle story than is the story of how David faced Goliath and prevailed. Paul finally came to the end of his mortal life at the hands of Roman executioners, who beheaded him. But before that occurred, Paul had transformed his world. Truly, though, it would be more accurate to say the Paul’s *faith* did the work of transforming it.

In our brief gospel reading this morning, Jesus previews in a spectacular way for His disciples the world-transforming faith that God’s plan will have them take out into the world. He shows them the power of faith in a way that they are certain to appreciate. Of the disciples, several, as we know, are fishermen. They are well acquainted with the Sea of Galilee and its moods. As boys, we can assume, they were taught the art of sailing by their fathers. We can assume that, like their fathers and their fathers before them, they are expert sailors and oarsmen. And so, when a squall so powerful comes up that it has them petrified with terror, it must be, indeed, powerful. Out there on the Sea of Galilee that day, the disciples encountered limitations in what they were able to do. But Jesus presents them with “a picture,” we might say, of a level of faith that at the time seems beyond reach. It is a vision of their world, the Sea of Galilee and its shores, transformed. Jesus commands the wind and the water. As the disciples, like Paul, go out from their world to face the world generally, the vision Jesus has presented to them will inspire them in their own transformative work.

Because of their love for Jesus, followers of Christ have worked great changes in the world; and, along the way, they have developed remarkable competencies. One might think of people such as Albert Schweitzer, who gave up a career as a concert organist, studied medicine, and against all odds established a hospital in an African jungle. As we reflect on what

about us makes us competent, we can see, of course, that we learned this skill and that from various people in our lives. But isn't it true that skills we feel most confident about were given to us by special people who loved us very much – who communicated to us, not just “how-to” understandings, but the understanding, as well, that we in ourselves have inestimable value? And isn't it true that to some extent at least the best of fathers are, in a sense, “mothers” as well to their children? We notice here a kernel of truth about our faith in our Heavenly Father: If we honestly believe that God loves us and that He wants us to work toward transforming our world, we have an invisible source of power that is always at-ready to remove limitations. With ever-expanding faith in our hearts and minds, the balance that we wish to keep cannot be, then, a static thing.