

FAITH'S FIRST DWELLING

Texts on Sunday, May 13, 2012

Matthew 12: 46-50; 2 Timothy 1: 1-7

If you have heard a number of my sermons, you will not be surprised to hear me say that I do not worry about a person who is not a Christian. God is good—so that single piece of information—“not a Christian”—does not move me to alarm about the individual’s well-being, define it how you will. Neither does the information that a person *is* Christian settle in my mind the question of his well-being. The eternal condition of human being is not subject to a divine check-off at the last hour. My concern is that a person is becoming a person; that is, that she be to herself in some measure a question, an openness, a work unfinished, and possible; that he be finding in himself more of courage and power to move beyond himself in love; that more and more, she and he sense their freedom to choose to what they will give attention. I do not suppose Christian faith the only path to divine blessing, but it is the only path I know—and I know that it is good enough to guide any feet and will not fail any who ask authentically. With souls unnumbered, I have had the privilege of observing quite personally how offering them elbow room to be and to become is the worthy gift of a friend in Christ.

If it turns out that I am wrong about heaven and God and judgment, I am pretty sure my defense attorneys will be able to make a good case in the courts of the eternal that I learned my way from the example of Jesus in the gospels. “He thought he was following orders, Most High!” they might say. But the fact is, long before we find our way to a theory of God and Jesus which is mated with the Scriptures, we learned the faith that has come to us through a person whose patterns of living showed us at the right time that faith made a difference, that faith works.

When I hear the apostle writing to his beloved co-worker Timothy, saying “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice,” that sounds to me just right: our faith first dwelt in our mothers. If your own mother was simply not the vessel through which light was passed to you, then someone else was supplied to you, or will be, and that person, man or woman, is your faith mother. In all that we say today, be thinking of your faith mother. For many of us, as for Timothy, our faith first dwelt in our grandmother and in our mother. Happy Mothers’ Day. Happy faith mothers day.

In the early evening of May 13, four years ago today, my mother died. Mother’s Day had just come two days before and in two days more, her birthday would follow, so as you might imagine, “mother’s day” has come to

seem for my family not one day but a whole season, with its particular light and winds and warmth.

If my mother had had breath and wakefulness to speak a last wish, she could not have been more glad than to say with the apostle, “To Timothy, my beloved child: grace, mercy, and peace from God—” for Timothy is the name of her first-born child, my oldest brother. Unlike the lives of her four younger children, Tim’s life is not peaceful. What they call schizophrenia and the drugs they use to dull that demon have jammed his mind in obscurities for many decades. It is not all darkness. He has a warm smile for his siblings’ approach on a visit in the psych center, and my other brother, who cares for him most truly now, brings us news of kindling conversations with our Tim. Yet is it any surprise that the person whose love of Tim is still the sun to our reflected loves is our mother?—in whom our faiths first dwelt; on whose body of life shone the word “my beloved child.”

In the middle of the 1960s, this mother of five was clambering up out of a fearsome lifelong disregard for herself, as if by sheer force of will pulling herself from a submerged vehicle into the light and the air. She was in this chrysalis when at nineteen, son Tim suffered the psychotic break which turned his life down its tortuous path. Both my parents devoted immense resources to their son, and though it is not my aim here to compare them or idealize them or ignore their weaknesses, yet for our purpose, which is to reflect on faith’s first dwelling, I hope you may see in one person what has come alive for millions of us across the generations: an uncanny, winsome, steadfast love, carried through all of life in prayer and feeling and practice.

In the wake of Tim’s breakdown, my mother focused on the mystery of the mind and became a psychotherapist. From her chair, she gave to hundreds the elbow room to heal and grow. For some of them, she was faith’s mother. Up and down the Hudson Valley, she traveled to visit her boy and fight for his care. She prayed. Up and down the roller-coaster of hope and anguish she rocked. Like a big-game hunter, she tracked the best new science of the mind. When de-institutionalization became the fashion, she found placements for Tim not far from her home, so she might see him often. As she aged, she grew ever smaller, but remained so stout an advocate for all the mentally ill that even New York’s Commissioner for Mental Hygiene gave her room in Albany. To the end, she often called her first-born “Timmer,” a sound that invokes even now the attitude of unbreakable solidarity with the irreducible good of the being of another person, without regard for any of his doing: not his performance, not his achievement, not his behavior. Just Timmer. I hope you know this attitude, this spirit. It is where faith first dwelt.

In sermons here, I have several times spoken of my enduring gratitude for

the opportunities I have had to hold hundreds of satisfying conversations with men in prison. In them, I have met a desire for growth and learning more precise and practical than is found in an average grouping of people on the outside. Many of these men report that they have held their integrity by the love of their mother or their grandmother, the woman who never abandons the child to his fate, not denying what it was he did, but neither judging the meaning of his being on measures uttered in one sentence. They call her “Moms,” as you may know. Her reality, no matter how far removed, shines the sun’s light in every cell. There faith first dwelt for many. This is Jesus’ story.

In my own life, my mother served like that. Perhaps you have seen how it can come to pass that a young adult so acts and reacts to what emerges in his life that he becomes tangled in their web, as astounded as a tiger in a net, unprepared for the consequences arising from his chain of errors. My life was wound up in a web like that in a certain season long ago. How can I forget what it was like then, as a grown young man, to weep for weakness and despair in the presence and care of my own mother, who shamed me not for the turns I had taken, but stood only for my being and my becoming.

In December of that year when the bear-trap of my choices had sprung, I went out alone from my small dwelling in Albany to receive the light from a Christmas concert in a great cathedral. In the course of the anthems, one selection struck my memory like campfire light to a man lost in a forest. The listing in the evening program—“*The Shepherd’s Farewell*,” Hector Berlioz—had not caught my attention, but the meaning of the music was laid down in me from my childhood, from when faith first dwelt in me. I had not heard the song in a dozen years or more, I think, so its goodness ambushed me with hope. At that stage of my life, I still did not consider myself a Christian, but I knew where I came from. That night, I wrote my mother this letter:

When we were young, you played great choral music in the morning, before church on the hi-fi. Nothing reminds me of you more completely than that act establishing your home for the Lord. When I hear any of that music today, I am humbled and joyful, assured of a presence which I once knew like bare feet to the ground.

The sound awakened us, or was there when we woke, to the day of the week on which the others seemed to depend. We knew you suffered; and though you did not oppress us with that, we knew the music and your suffering were connected. I was vaguely afraid of your ill body. I think I did not trust it as a vessel for my mother, and troubled indistinctly for contagion it might bear. Still, your music—and it came to us that way, as yours—put away fears. The music was a radiance clothed on your body, and we knew that you knew that radiance. I would lie awhile in bed to be gathered in by the

significance of the sound, which moved with the purity of intent of an angel's voice and secured for me an apprehension of what is sacred and what is victory. You took such pleasure in the music, we could not have done other than identify it with healing. The music was your confession of faith in the sound of God's truth.

During the two great seasons, this glory was magnified. Especially during Advent, the dark, cold weather seemed to concert with the message and the music to gain for me a better seat in the soul. Even now, a candle alight with the words of Isaiah—Make straight a path in the wilderness, a highway for our God—seems also still your light. The brilliance entered our lives through your frail and humble body, inspired from the realm of truth without longing.

An ornament under the Christmas tree each year was a little church with stained glass windows lighted from within by a little lamp. It detailed broad stone steps leading up to great doors. Through childhood years, I always felt that I knew that church in real life; that I had once walked up those steps with my father in the pitch of a December night; that you were very sick and not with us; and that the light from those windows and the establishment of that church offered inviolate affirmation of your well-being, despite your absence and illness. Perhaps it did happen; I had it that way in my heart every year all the same.

We have more lately come to know how those very years of our childhood wore hard on you: how you suffered within and your body bore it. But I have learned what I write here tonight by a means different from thought. I would have to store all this with other wonderful memories, as lovely things now past, except for this: in my long, halting, unfaithful, somehow persistent attendance for a sign that God has indeed been revealed on earth, I know the answer when that music and light reach my soul now, often unexpectedly, but always, across these years and changes, by reflection through your humble hands; a blessing, a revelation. I know so much about the Son that way.

Love, your son, Stephen

When the apostle commends to his beloved Timothy the memory of his mothers in whom his faith first dwelled, this is the story that comes to my mind. I hope you have had your own to tell as you listened to mine. However that may be, whoever that mother of faith is or will be for you, trust that God is for you, first and last; and that you may always rekindle the gift of God that is within you. *For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of sound mind.* Happy Mother's Day.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

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in the City of New York*