

DAVID AND JONATHAN

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Mark 5:21-43
The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 8b)
June 28, 2015
All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia

It has been quite a week with Supreme Court decisions upholding the Affordable Care Act and granting a constitutional right to marry for same-sex couples, with funerals for those murdered at Mother Emmanuel Church Charleston, with an eloquent Governor Nikki Haley declaring that it is time for the Confederate flag to be removed from the grounds of the capitol, and with the continuing manhunt for the remaining escaped murderer in New York State. I have been captivated by the news, --all of it addressing matters about which I find I really care to one degree or another.

Caring is a bit of a two-edged sword in much of life. Related to an Old English word that means something like 'lament', caring can bring us a measure of challenge and sorrow for our pains. 'Care' is like 'concern' or 'weight', 'responsibility' or even 'grief' in some senses. We might say that there is an inherent sadness in our caring. *Mountains Beyond Mountains* is a book by Tracy Kidder¹ in which he tells the story of a remarkable doctor and anthropologist in

¹ Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World* (Random House, 2003)

his quest to briefing the life-saving resource of modern medicine to the poorest of the poor in the world. Dr. Paul Farmer is particularly focused on Haiti, but his organization, Partners in Health, has worked in Cuba, Russia and Peru among other places with remarkable results. It is a great story and portrait of an extraordinary man whose single focused *care* came at a price for those who knew and loved him. One of these was a sometime lover and long term partner in his work, an Englishwoman called Ophelia Dahl. She wrote him a letter in which she said: “My inability to promise a life with you as your wife, does not stem form a lack of love or a deep, deep commitment to you. Indeed, as you probably know, I have not felt a serious ounce for anyone but you since 1983. My decision was based, instead, on trying to envision our life together and I saw us not matching...” She went on to talk about his unswerving commitment to the poor, and his massive compassion for others. She wrote: “as your wife, I would place my own emotional needs in the way of your important vision whose impact upon the poor and the rest of us can’t be exaggerated...”²

It is almost as though caring implies a hierarchy of concerns in which some people are more important than others, at least some of the time. Dr. Farmer is apparently wont to say that he cares first about the poor, then prisoners, then the rest. He did find love with a

² Paperback edition, 2009, p.66-7

beautiful and talented woman from Haiti called Didi and together they have three children. He has received the highest honors that Harvard University can bestow and currently lives in Kigali, Rwanda. Even so, his life is full of tough choices, in the same way as is true for any of us who find that we are given genuine cares and concerns. Truth is, I'm much more interested in the Supreme Court decisions of the last few days than I am the funerals in Charleston or the manhunt in New York. I suppose I do have a hierarchy of concerns even in response to the news of the day.

We know that Jesus lived the way of self-giving love, even unto death, and made it possible for us to know that self-giving love is the way of life for us as well. He showed and made possible our discovery that it is in service that we are freed and in giving that we receive. But even he had some limits apparently. In today's reading we hear of him responding to the needs that present themselves to him from the rich and powerful like Jairus' begging for his sick daughter and from the poor and almost unnoticed, --the unnamed woman with hemorrhages risking her life in hope of healing. (She could have been put to death for essentially making all those she touched unclean as she pushed through the crowd around Jesus.) I read more than one commentary suggesting that part of what we should take from this story is an awareness that it is often in the unplanned interruptions to our lives that we will see the hand of God at

work. I'm more aware of how difficult it can be to keep going when those who would interrupt are quite demanding in their insistence that I stop whatever I'm doing to take care of them.

Walk with me to Crawford-Young, Emory Midtown Hospital sometime to make a visit and see how many times I am stopped by people in genuine need hoping that this will be one of those days when I will give them some money. I rarely see the hand of God at work in these encounters, but once in a while a genuine conversation can be a blessing along the way.

Sometimes I say 'yes' just so that I know I can. But I am really quite good at saying 'no'. Is that lack of care and compassion or is it something else? Is it about doing what is most important at that moment? That will have to wait until judgment day to get sorted out. What we know about Jesus is that sometimes his care and concern led him to seek solitude for prayer and renewal, and at other times he would leave the needy clamoring for his attention and move on to a new place or cross over to the other side. He was not always available to all-comers. He seems to have kept the main thing, the main thing all along.

So the reality of our caring leads us to difficult decisions and choices on one hand and also to real pain on the other. David loved Jonathan and mourned the death of his great friend and some would say his lover saying "greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women. How the mighty have fallen..." Real care, --real love—

will open us to the likelihood that we will at some point experience not only what feels like compromise, but also real loss. Real caring is costly and yet liberating. Real love is constraining and yet freeing.

If you care enough to be excited, as I am, about health care being made available for all Americans or if you are excited, as I am, that lesbian and gay brothers and sisters are free to enjoy the rights and responsibilities of marriage, then by all means celebrate with abandon. Do not be deterred by those who disagree and who will seek to undermine your joy. And if you care enough that you are profoundly disturbed by these decisions, take another look at what is really important to you and be faithful to the care you have been given without hatred or blame or despair.

Caring is complex but it is also at the heart of any vocation or calling. Paul Farmer found his passion in and for life, but it did not protect him from loss, anger, frustration and hard decisions. But in his perseverance he brought and still brings significant change for the better to many of the world's poorest peoples. We know about Jesus and his concern for the poor, for those in any need or trouble, his compassion for all those who were being excluded from society by rules attributed to God, opening the way of salvation even for us gentiles, great

personal cost, --at the cost of his own life. David who was to become King after the deaths of Saul and his beloved Jonathan, spent his reign consolidating and protecting his people, making Jerusalem his capital and fighting off enemies within and without Israel. He was not sentimental about the forces that would undermine his given care and concern, the people of Israel. He, flawed as he was, kept on building the Kingdom.

Caring carries a price, but is a way in which God calls every one of us to purpose and meaning. King David, you, me, Paul Farmer, some court plaintiffs this past week --even Jesus— will carry on with sober joy, knowing that in the end what matters is that we and those we seek to serve are beloved of God.

Let us, as ever, respond to the Gospel in silence and in prayer...