

“Whose Child are You”
Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany
January 8, 2012 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

The well-known preacher, Bible commentator and preaching professor, Fred Craddock tells the following true story. The exact facts of the story seem to shift in the telling and retelling, but the essential facts do not.

A minister and his wife (and let’s assume they were Craddock and his wife) were on a vacation in the Smokey Mountains when a distinguished, older gentleman came to their table in the hotel dining room. The man was, as it turned out, a celebrity, a former governor of Tennessee. When the man learned that the diner was a professor of preaching, the man said he had a story to tell him about a preacher.

It seems that when the governor was born, his mother wasn’t married and he never knew his father. In that era in the South to be illegitimate led to a difficult childhood. He was teased and called names by the other children. Whenever he was out with his mother in public he was painfully aware that he had but one parent.

One day, when he was about ten, he was in church. Usually, when he went to church and the service was over, he would slip discreetly out the back door. This meant that he never had to talk to the minister, never had to share his name. On this particular Sunday, though, he got swept up by the crowd and before he knew it, there was the pastor at the front door, his hand extended.

“Well, son,” the preacher’s voice boomed out, “Whose boy are you?” The preacher could hardly have asked a more embarrassing question. The boy flushed and started to stammer – but before he could say anything more, the preacher (still gripping the boy’s hand) said: “I know! You’re God’s son!” He slapped him on the shoulder and said, “Boy, go claim your inheritance.”

The boy never forgot that incident. He never forgot the preacher’s kindness in not drawing attention to his situation. He never forgot the way the preacher sent him out, either; “Go claim your inheritance!” Long after he became one of the most popular governors in Tennessee history, this man still delighted in telling the story of the day the preacher told him he was a child of God.

When I was about two years old my parents divorced. Mother and I came back East, my father remained on the west coast. It was not a pleasant divorce, to say the least, and, for a variety of reasons, I saw my father only a few times. I would come to think that he had abandoned me. Mother had remarried when I was about seven and I will never forget the embarrassment of having a different last name from my mother and my siblings who came along after that marriage.

When I was sixteen, my father was killed in an automobile accident. Living in the highly dysfunctional environment that home had become I had often fantasized that my father would sweep in from the West one day and rescue me. That dream ended on a two lane country road in California.

In my late twenties my husband and I were watching a TV movie about a woman in her thirties who had been adopted as a child but had searched for her biological parents and finally found out the location of one of them. In the scene before me on the TV that night the young woman was walking up a concrete walkway towards the door of the house where she was to meet her parent for the first time. At that moment as she raised her hand to knock on the door I burst into tears. I was stunned at my reaction. It was as if an incredible ache swept over me. What I learned about myself that night was that I had a deep sadness for never having had a decent chance to know my father. It struck at the core of my identity, opened a big hole inside. A big piece of me felt missing.

I remember sitting beside a friend at a dinner party many years ago. I don't know how we got there in the conversation but he shared with me about his father's death when he was only 10 or 12 years old. The same thing happened with another friend a few years later – again at a dinner table among friends who were talking about much lighter matters. Both of these men had become very successful as adults, but as they had shared their story with me, it resonated and I felt such compassion for the “child” within each of us who had suffered loss. I sensed that same longing in them that I had felt, of feeling some piece, deep inside, still missing.

So what do these personal stories of a Tennessee governor, me and my two friends have to do with our Gospel passage this morning?

Everything!

Because they remind me, at least, of the gap between what I wanted or thought I needed from my parents and the reality that I am, as are each of us, a child of God. What an incredible feeling if I understand somewhere in the inside of me, in my heart, in my mind, at that place where identity is shaped and formed in the very core of my being that I am Someone's very special child. I sense, don't you, the enormity of the story of a small boy in Tennessee at the moment he heard the words: “I know! You're God's son! Go and claim it.” Those words affirmed an identity he had since birth, but had been unable to feel, had been unable to claim.

“Whose child is this?” is a major question the gospels try to answer right away. For the Gospel writers it seemed critical to address Jesus' identity as soon as possible in the story of his life.

We see this clearly in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew in their birth narratives. God sends an angel, a messenger, to tell provocative and amazing news. To Mary, in Luke; to Joseph, in Matthew. The angel makes four important points: that a child will be born, that the child's name is to be Jesus, that the child's conception was holy and that the child will be a Savior, the Messiah.

The Gospel of Mark is different. There are no infancy or child narratives about Jesus in this Gospel. What you heard this morning is the beginning of the Gospel, Chapter 1. Mark's version of the gospel good news starts with Jesus' baptism in the wilderness. It starts with the Holy tearing open the heavens, the Spirit of God bridging heaven and earth and the voice of God stating the identity of the young man rising from the waters of the Jordan. It is an identity defining moment. “You are my Son, the Beloved.” And then the incredible affirmation: “With you I am well pleased.”

I call this passage in the Gospel of Mark a birth narrative. Just as powerful, perhaps even more so, as the birth narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Jesus' identity was in place from the beginning, even when he was in his mother's womb. But it is here when Jesus is a thirty-something young man that he can really hear and claim that identity. It is here with God's voice that Jesus' identity is firmly, authoritatively stated. If he didn't know it before, now he does. He is God's son, he is loved and God is well pleased with him.

Despite the romanticized beauty of crèche scenes, this scene in the Gospel of Mark has become my favorite "birth" narrative offered in any of the Gospels.

I love the idea that at any age in our lives there is the possibility that God is trying to tell us that we are a child of God, that we are so loved, that we are accepted and, yes, even claimed, by the Divine. And that God will break through anything – even tear open the heavens – to make that reality known to us.

The story of the governor and the preacher at the door has a footnote. A footnote that is really about the one who told the story, Fred Craddock. Craddock remembers his father as a wonderful storyteller. The senior Craddock was probably an influence in his son's later preaching life and in his style of using stories and illustrations so effectively to draw his preaching audiences into a sermon. But father Craddock had personal problems of his own that may have affected his family and in particular his son. It is said of Fred Craddock that though he gathered all manner of awards during fifty years of preaching (including being named one of the ten best preachers in the English speaking world) he never received praise for his calling from the one man he wanted to hear it from – his father. In his own words, this world renowned preacher, author, commentator said: "I struggled with his (my father's) silence. I wanted him to say he was proud of me."

In his later years, Fred Craddock shared the following:

"When I was in my late teens I wanted to be a preacher. When I was in my late twenties I wanted to be a good preacher. Now that I'm older I want more than anything else to be a Christian. To live simply, to love generously, to speak truthfully, to serve faithfully and leave everything else to God."

There is a sense of immense peace in these words. A sense that whatever may have been missing in his life earlier had been filled with something lasting, fulfilling, sustaining. I sense that perhaps the affirmation he so desired from his father had happened, if not from his biological father then from his Divine one. I like to think that at some point, he may have really heard and really claimed the startling good news that the heart of the Divine wants us all to hear and know as truth in our lives: "You are my child, my son, my daughter. You are beloved. With you I am well pleased."

By God's amazing grace may it be so in all our lives.

I want that peace. How about you?

The Rev. Torrence Harman

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NOTE: My thanks to The Rev. Lynn Holland, priest in charge of St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Fleeton) in Reedville, Va. for telling me of Fred Craddock's story of the governor and the preacher. I found that there are various versions of the story, as it has been told and retold, but that the basic facts about the encounter of a young Ben Hooper (illegitimately born but later Governor of Tennessee) and the preacher in the story appear consistent. There is much information about Fred Craddock on the internet including some of his sermons.