

A TIME TO EMBRACE
Sermon, May 8, 2011
Mother's Day
Text: I Peter 1:17-23; 5:6-11

"All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you." 1 Peter 5:5-6

A message reiterated again and again throughout the Scriptures is that humility is the path to God's grace and blessing. Maybe that's why there are so many blessings in being a parent.

Trust me on this: few things will teach you humility better than parenting. And that is especially true of motherhood! As one person put it, "IF IT WAS GOING TO BE EASY, IT NEVER WOULD HAVE STARTED WITH SOMETHING CALLED 'LABOR!'" If nine months of pregnancy and the ordeal and indignities of childbirth were not enough to convince you motherhood is a good teacher of humility, then caring for a child will. Besides giving up your sleep, giving up your freedom, giving up your time, giving up your discretionary income, giving up friends who can't carry on a conversation with a baby crying in the background, time and again you give up your dignity. Parenthood can indeed be a harsh yet effective teacher of humility, if for no other reason you learn in a big hurry that *you can't do it all, you don't have it all and you don't know it all*. Which, by the way, is true whether you are a parent or not. None of us can do it all, none of us can have it all, and certainly none of us know it all. However, that doesn't mean any of us should give up *trying* at all, but that's almost another sermon! Parenthood, though, brings this lesson home to us again and again ... you can't do it all, you don't have it all and you don't know it all.

Perhaps my favorite Mother's Day newspaper comic was a "For Better or Worse" strip portraying teenaged Michael's mother Elly tossing and turning on her bed late at night. She was thinking about her role as a mother, asking herself: *"Am I too tough or am I too lenient? Do I give in too much or too little? Do I listen to what he has to say? Do I understand him? Do I nag him too much? Am I really a good parent?"* Then the last frame of the comic shifts to teenaged Michael's room. He is lying on his bed muttering to himself, *"The problem with grownups is they think they know it all."* No, Michael. We really don't. Time and again parenthood ... and life in general, for that matter ... reminds us, "No, we don't know it all. And we can't do it all. And we don't have it all." That is humbling, and it can also be frightening. However, humility and fear are not bad things if they drive us to more fully embrace the God Who does know it all, Who does have it all, Who can certainly do it all ... and Who loves us all.

Again, the words of Peter: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith."

I could be wrong, but I think the last time we looked at this verse of scripture was the Sunday just after the terror of September 11, 2001. I told you that morning of a touching communication we had received from the bishop of the Reformed Church in Croatia; for five or so years we had been sending mission support to them in that war-torn country (*some of you may remember the visits from PCUSA Croatian missionary Steven Kurtz, and from Croatian nationals Boris and Lidia Gunevic*). Bishop Langh had spent a lifetime caring for a society torn apart by violence; he and those he worked with knew what it was like to be invaded, to be terrorized, by evil. They have known the kind of loss and brutality we had experienced on 9-11 for literally centuries in their own country. He wrote:

"We want to assure you of our prayers for you as you endure this great tragedy, just as you have so often prayed for us. May the same Lord who guided us through the war and horror of human evil now guide, support and comfort you as you endure this huge sorrow and loss. May He somehow show us all His love, and by some great grace, give us the power not to wish evil for evil. The Lord be with you all." -- signed, Endre Langh, brother in Christ, Bishop.

I was particularly struck by the last line, *"May He somehow show us all His love, and by some great grace, give us the power not to wish evil for evil."* The good Bishop's prayer was that God would give us the power not to wish evil for evil. Wishing evil for evil is the essence of revenge. Revenge, at root, is born of malice, malice is born of hatred, and hatred more often than not is born of evil. Revenge only works to make us evil.

I fully believed then, and I fully believe now, the evil responsible for the events of 9-11 was much more than the work of a handful of crazed fanatics. And it certainly was more than the work of one man, the criminal mastermind who was delivered to his Maker by our brave special forces last Sunday. Last Sunday my parents were at Citizen's Bank Park Stadium in Philadelphia attending a Phillies' baseball game with my cousin and some friends. They told me the delightful story of my cousin's friend receiving a "tweet" message on her I-Phone that Osama Bin Laden had been killed; subsequently, people all over the stadium were answering their personal

phones and apparently receiving the same message ... and soon 44,000 or so people were rocking the stadium with a spontaneous chant "U-S-A! U-S-A! U-S-A!" The players on the field had no idea what was going on. I'm told the announcers in the broadcast studio had also received the unofficial news, and were debating whether or not to say anything on air ... then one of them commented, "Looks like they all know already!" By the way, this was three or four *hours* before the President addressed the nation with the announcement. It was a wonderfully spontaneous and moving patriotic moment; what a thrill for my parents. I must admit, however, in the subsequent flood of news coverage throughout the week, I've felt some discomfort. Don't misunderstand; I share the pride in our special forces and welcome the administration of justice, but there's a big difference between saying "Justice has been served" and "Vengeance is ours." Some of the celebration and political rhetoric portrayed in the media was just a little over the top, crossing that fine line between "justice" and "vengeance." Reveling in vengeance gives evil a foothold in our hearts; as the Bishop prayed, we are not to wish evil for evil.

Again, I do believe the evil of 9-11 was the work of so much more than just a handful of madmen. It was the work of the devil himself, for only the devil is capable of such cold, merciless destruction of human life on such catastrophic levels using planeloads of innocents as missiles. What are we to do about evil, not just evil of this magnitude? We can't fight it all, we can't get rid of it all, we can't avoid it all. Well, according to Peter, we are called to active resistance of evil through humility, alertness and resistance. *"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."* Then Peter says, "Resist him." Resist evil. We can do that. We *must* do that. We are not powerless. Two ways we resist evil:

First, we resist evil by resisting rage. Anger is appropriate. There is a time and place for anger. I believe God Himself is angered by evil. However, rage is something else. To become enraged is to allow the enemy to convert us, to make us into his image; in a word, we become our enemy. The main difference between anger and rage is that anger is something you possess. Rage is something that possesses you. And being possessed is always the work of the devil. *Do not allow rage and hatred to possess you.* If you do, the enemy wins. The heart is the only entrance evil has into our lives. The heart is the entrance through which the prowling devil lion claws his way in and eventually consumes a person from the inside out. The heart is what the devil first got a hold of to make men like bin Laden capable of engineering such carnage and destruction. Such people do not guard their hearts and the evil overcomes them. The evil claws its way in and eventually consumes them. Don't let that happen to you.

Second, we resist evil by embracing God. Again, the words of Peter, *"Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith."* You resist evil by choosing to embrace God (*and choosing not to embrace and/or wrestle the prowling lion*). In 1975 a new attraction opened up at the St. Louis Zoo called "Big Cat Country." Such safari-like open verandas were the rage in the seventies; I remember the opening year of the drive-thru safari at Six Flags Great Adventure in New Jersey. Lots of little "bugs" had to be worked out as these attractions drew crowds; I vividly remember how the baboons used to love pouncing on and devouring the vinyl roofs of some automobiles (*much to the terror of the cars' passengers!*) before cars with vinyl roofs were banned from the safari. In St. Louis' Big Cat Country, the lions and tigers were released from their cages and allowed to roam about in large enclosures. Visitors were allowed to observe the cats by walking on elevated, fenced-in skyways above the habitats. However, the fencing of those "catwalks" was one of those bugs that still needed perfecting. Sometime soon after the opening, two mothers took their children up one of the skyway ramps, and a blanket became entangled in the wheel of the one stroller. While they knelt to try and untangle the wheel, two of the boys -- ages three and five -- went ahead. When their mother looked up, she discovered the boys had innocently walked right through a child-sized gap in the fencing and had climbed up on the rocks some twenty feet above the lions. One good leap, and a lion could be right there with them. Pointing to the lions below, the older boy called back to his mother, "Hey, Mom, we can see them!" They had no concept of how much danger they were in. Mom saw immediately. But what could she do? If she screamed, she might startle the boys perched precariously above the lions, or she might draw the lion's attention. She couldn't go after them, for the gap in the fence was too small for her to get through.

This quick-thinking mother knelt down, spread out her arms, and said, "Boys, come get a hug!" They came running ... *running* ... for the gracious embrace of their mother, a gracious embrace that saved them from danger greater than they could perceive. They were confident of their mother's love. They didn't fear her, they ran in joy toward her, and in doing so, they escaped the danger and evil of the prowling lions below. They rushed into her embrace, and her embrace protected them in ways they didn't even know. I hope the analogy is obvious. Be confident of your heavenly Father's love. Rush into His arms, let His embrace protect you, *"... cast your anxiety upon Him for He cares for you."* By embracing God we are saved from countless dangers, both known and unknown.

How do we handle the evils that threaten to devour us or the fears of inadequacy that threaten to undo us? By humbling ourselves before God, by casting our anxieties on Him, and by entering His embracing arms of love and protection.