

Luke 4:16-30

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?' He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Luke 15:11-20

Then Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me." So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.' " So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

"Jesus Josephson"

Rev. Charles Schuster

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When we receive Communion on the Sundays in which we serve it, the first Sunday of every month, we often will say that this is the new covenant with God, a new way of ?

looking at the same old thing. A new way of being with the same old God to the point that we see God in a way we never had. So this morning, I want to talk with you about the new covenant with God, and how Jesus took fear out of faith, and guilt out of God. To be honest with you, I must confess I've had a hard time with a subject which calls for the recognition that Jesus was the son of Joseph. First of all there's a problem because we don't know much about Joseph, so in some ways, there isn't that much to say. We know that the day Jesus preached his first sermon in his own church and the people were trying to figure out who that was, someone, probably from the balcony, or maybe the choir loft, said in a voice that was at least loud enough to be remembered, "Who is this? Where'd we get this preacher?" It might have asked, "Did he go to Duke or Iliff or Boston or Garrett or Drew?" And somebody would say, "Oh, that's, you know, Joseph's son."

We believe Joseph heard voices and had dreams and acted on those dreams. We think that he was in the family tree of David, maybe on one of the distant branches. We're told he took Mary and their son to Egypt when there was danger in the land. It seems certain that Joseph taught Jesus to be a builder, to follow in his line of work. And the last thing we really hear about Joseph is the story about Jesus at age 12, taken to Jerusalem He got lost in the crowd and Mary found him in the temple saying to her son, "Didn't you know that your father and I would be worried about you?" And it seems that Joseph died when Jesus was a young man, because we don't hear anything else about him. The primary reason I have a problem with the fact that Jesus was the son of Joseph in a sermon that lifts up the fatherhood of God is that I know there are people hearing this sermon whose fathers are their biggest problem. I know there are people here who have been abused by their fathers, and the idea of God as father is an impossible one to accept.

Bill Cosby wrote a book on fatherhood. My sense is that he didn't have such a positive relationship with his father. I could be wrong, but this is what he said. "My father did try hard not to curse around me, an effect that after rendering him almost semi-articulate, having to squelch the profanities that he dearly wanted to lavish on me, reduced him to saying such things as, "If you ever...", "Because you're a..." and "I'll be....", "Because it's just too..." and "I swear I'll....." For many years I thought my father was a man who had the incapacity of finishing a sentence. I made him swallow curses like after-dinner mints. He never gave me a beating, but he often hit for distance. He would say, "I brought you into this world, and I can take you out, and it don't make no difference to me. I'll just make another one just like you." One day when my father was reading in the living room, my brother and I decided we could play basketball in the living room without breaking anything. I took a jump shot that redesigned the glass table. My dad said, "So help me, I'll bust you in half." And then after he thought about it he said, "No I wouldn't do that, why would I want two of you?"

Lily Tomlin wrote a book about Edith Ann, but I think it's autobiographical. I don't think her father was such a good role model, either. "My dad always said, "Lily, what do you want to be when you grow up?" as if what I am right now was not enough. "Lily, just be yourself," he'd say. And then he'd criticize everything about me, and then when I'd be myself he'd say, "Stop doing that." He never seemed to get, what I was doing was just being myself. Either he didn't know who I really am, or I'm really not who he had in

mind. He did everything he could to teach me to walk and talk, and then he told me to sit down and shut up. My dad had a drinking problem. He and I were the last to know.”

Lily Tomlin, Bill Cosby. Others would say the same. How can you think of God as father when your father was not a caring man? And I add myself to that sad tale. It’s hard for me to think of God as father. On Fathers’ Day I try to get someone else to preach, as a matter of fact. You may have noticed that. Hard for me to think of the fatherhood of God, because my father, every now and then, would turn violent, and ended his life in suicide, and it could have been a homicide. But our tradition gives us Joseph, and Jesus calls God “father.” Maybe the most important thing to remember about our tradition and what it says is that Joseph was a father figure. Maybe the reason we have the story of the virgin birth is for those of us who have had serious problems with our fathers, but in life, we have had father figures. I hope it is true for all of us, if our father hasn’t been for us what we needed him to be, I hope we had a father figure.

My grandfather was my father figure. He took me in at age nine. He taught me self-respect, and to trust myself. My grandfather was a lawyer and a judge. He was elected as county judge, three eight-year terms, and I remember the last time he ran. The man he was running against, in a school auditorium, in a debate they had, said of my grandfather, who was the incumbent, that everyone in the town knew that all the important court rulings that he had made the last sixteen years, all those important rulings, were made by his wife, my grandmother. I watched my grandfather step up to the microphone to answer the charge and I heard him say, as he looked at the audience with a twinkle in his eye, “Well, they were good decisions, weren’t they?” Plus, none of them ever got turned over by a higher court.

It was my grandfather who stood in the middle of a bridge during the Depression years, when the coal miners were coming into the city to riot in the streets because they had nothing to eat, it was my grandfather who stopped them and turned them around by organizing the merchants in the community to provide food to the miners and assist him to deliver it. It was my grandfather who told me something I’ll never forget. He looked at me one time and he said, “Charles, never back down from something just because you’re afraid of it.” It was my grandfather who told me, the Sunday after my grandmother died and we were in church, we were singing a hymn, and he leaned over to me and said, “I’m very proud of the fact that you are a minister. Be a damn good one.” It was my grandfather who, after he heard me preach the only sermon he ever heard me preach, said, “Charles, I think you talk too fast. But I have the same problem.” He was a father figure for me, and so was Joseph for Jesus. And if you needed a father figure, I hope you had one, because it’s important.

How important is it that Jesus had a father figure? I think it’s at the heart and soul of the Christian faith. I think it’s what makes Christianity unique. It is the foundation of our approach to life, it is the inspiration that makes Christianity what it is. Christianity is a philosophical position as well as a lifestyle. It’s a way to think and it’s a way to live. In the words of Will Durant: Will Durant said, “The apex of history, it’s the three years that Jesus of Nazareth walked on this earth” That’s the apex of history, written by a man who

wrote the eleven volume set entitled *The History of Civilization*. That's significant. I like to think of Christianity this way: a preacher shaking hands after church. A couple greets the preacher. "We listened carefully to every word you said." And the preacher thanks the couple. It was their first visit, and says to the couple, "We all look forward to seeing you next Sunday," and the couple responded, "Oh we won't be here next week. We're going to another church next week to get a second opinion." Jesus gave a second opinion. Repeatedly he would say, "You have heard it said....but I say to you...." Two things because of him – a new covenant with God. Two things – he took fear out of faith. There can be lots of fear in faith. Fear of the Lord, fear of God, fear of punishment now or forever.

A little girl talking to her mother about George Washington, and the story of the cherry tree and the legend of how George chopped down the cherry tree and confessed to his father, saying, "I cannot tell a lie," and Sarah said to her mother, "Do people who never tell lies go to heaven?" "Yes," said her mother, "they're the only ones." And Sarah said, "Gosh, I'll bet it's lonesome up there with just God and George Washington." There's so much fear in faith, the judgment of God. Harold Bloom has written, I think, a very good book entitled *Jesus and Yahweh*, and the book is about the heritage that Jesus received and the idea of Yahweh God. It's about the fear of the Lord, it's about the omnipotent power of God, and how Jesus addressed that, and who he was as a symbol of faith. And you don't have to look very far in the Bible to see this God of fear, the God who punished Adam and Eve for eating the forbidden fruit, for example. Or the God who said to Israel, "I hate, I despise your feasts, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies." Or the God of Isaiah, when Isaiah stood in the temple and said, "Woe is me, how afraid I am, for I am a man of unclean lips and I stand amongst people of unclean lips. My eyes have seen the God face to face, the fear of God." The fear of God, it's in the text, it's in our tradition.

And here is Jesus with a second opinion, telling us, "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." A new covenant with God. He took fear out of faith. Jesus spoke of the new covenant with God. He spoke of a God whose highest hope was for the best of all. Jesus called God "Abba," wanting us to know what God was really like, and the word "Abba" means "loving father." Howard Addington is right in his book, *The Forgotten Man of Christmas*. He talks about Joseph, and he says, "When Jesus wanted us to know what God was like, he said God was like a strong, brave, tender, loving, understanding father." And where would he have learned that, if not from Joseph? This simple, unsophisticated builder from Nazareth, he was that kind of father figure. Was his father Joseph his God? No. But his father Joseph reminded him of a larger imperative and provided him with a moral compass. Joseph reminded him to make something of himself. So it is not the fear of God that drives us to do what is right every chance we get. It is the love of a God that compels us when we act, to do with our lives what is worthy of the God that we worship. It is not because we are afraid that we will spend out eternity in some kind of afterlife torture that drives us to our better selves, it is simply the love of God that we see every day that inspires us to join in the spreading of that love, so that in the end, the God who created all of this can be at home in the creation that God has made by our acts collectively of love and kindness. It is not fear that drives us from it, it is Abba that draws us toward it, and we can thank Joseph for that.

Secondly: Repeatedly he announced, “You have heard it said....but I say to you.....” Because of him, a new covenant with God. He took fear out of faith. He also took guilt out of God. There’s so much guilt that is connected to belief in God. Sometimes we get the idea that God is another word for conscience, and when we have done something wrong we hold onto the guilt of what we have done, and can’t let go. There was a young pastor right out of seminary who was told by a member of the church, about the first Sunday, “I want to tell you something. I don’t think you’re qualified to be our preacher. Oh, I know you’ve been to seminary. I know you’ve read lots of books, you have some of them in your office. And I see your diplomas on the wall. But you aren’t old enough to have sinned enough, to have repented enough, to be able to preach about it.”

Preachers get conditioned to use guilt when we speak of God. Like the preacher who said to the church congregation one Sunday, “I tell you what, God is tired of you people every Sunday singing the hymn “Standing on the Promises” when all we do is be sittin’ on the premises.” Lots of guilt when it come to God. We never have done enough, we always seem to get it wrong, it’ the dark side of ourselves and we can’t, somehow, be forgiven, or forget. But Jesus had a different idea. His idea was not to make us look back and feel guilty, but to help us look inwardly and be forgiven. Jesus tried to take the guilt out of God every chance he had. In the beginning of his ministry, how often did he say, after he healed someone, “and your sin is forgiven.” And at the very end of his life, on the cross, those words that we continue to discuss, “Forgive them, they don’t really know what they’re doing.” Jesus knew people have problems. He understood that we have a past. He realized, over the course of time, that we have made mistakes, and some of those mistakes are tragic and serious.

Bumper stickers on cars and trucks say a lot about us, and the fact that we all have problems. Bumper stickers, I think, are the contemporary confessional booths. I saw one the other day that said, “Lead me not into temptation – I can find it myself.” And another one that said, “If you can’t convince them, confuse them.” And another one that says, “I don’t worry about solutions, I’m enamored with the problems.” And “If at first you don’t succeed, redefine success.” And, “Never put off until tomorrow what you can avoid altogether.”

A new covenant calls for us to be honest with ourselves about the past and the times we have lost our way, but to know that God does not judge us. God forgives us if w own our mistakes, and even if we don’t. That’s the new covenant. Will Willimon calls those words an example of God’s “pre-emptive forgiveness,” and says the reason we need to confess our sin is not so that we can be forgiven by God, but because we have already been forgiven by God, we can deal with ourselves. And Jesus is hoping that if we can forgive ourselves, we can be brought closer to the God we worship. That’s the reason to confess.

This week we have watched Roger Clemens and his personal trainer testify before Congress about the illegal drubs they took. Someone’s not telling the truth. This week one of the Colorado Rockies pitchers Matt Herges confessed. “I did it, it was wrong, I’m

glad it's in the open now, I'll live with the consequences, whatever they decide. Now I can live with what I've done. Now I can move on with my life, wherever that leads me, because what I did was wrong. But not being able to admit it made it worse." Basic. Take the guilt out of God. Jesus was so intent on helping people take the guilt out of God, that the most dramatic story he ever told was the one that was called "The Prodigal Son". Most scholars are convinced that story is really not about two brothers, and the younger one who left home, it's about a loving, forgiving father. And the Biblical scholar Jeremias says in his book *The Parables of Jesus*, he says, "The parable of the prodigal describes with touching simplicity what God is like. God's goodness, God's grace, God's boundless mercy, God's abundant love. God rejoices over the return of a lost person like a father who is prepared to welcome a returning son." At that moment in history when Jesus had the attention of the world, he told a story that conveyed that we don't need to ask for forgiveness in order to be forgiven. We are forgiven. All we need to do is to accept our forgiveness or, as Paul Tillich said, "Accept the fact of our acceptance."

When Jesus reached into his past, he was not confronted with pale reminders of his mistakes, he was comforted with a vivid image of the acceptance of his father, and his understanding of God, who was more interested in celebrating our return than being focused on making us feel guilty for the times we had gone astray. It's acceptance, not guilt. It's freedom from the past, not imprisonment because of it. We are not to be burdened by the guilt of a judging father, we are to be encouraged by the celebration of a forgiving God, and we can thank Joseph for that. It's a new covenant with God, that calls for us to take fear out of faith, and to take guilt out of our belief in God. Thank God for the new covenant. Thank Jesus, who reminded us that "we had heard it said..., but he said to us...", and thank the one in his life who showed him this. His name was Joseph. He was a father figure, and Jesus was his son.