

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from June 6, 2010

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg
“PERFECT FAITH”

Scriptures:

1 Kings 17:17-24

Luke 7:11-17



We often hear of the perfect love of God, a love that transcends our imagination, a love greater than even the greatest love we may have for each other, a love that is indescribable, infinite and unconditional. And that perfect love of God's is accompanied by mercy and compassion, *divine* mercy and compassion, which we are called to strive towards, but which most of the time we just can't seem to attain. True forgiveness. Love for our enemies. Compassion for those who have hurt us. Mercy for the worst offenders.... We may not have it as much as we should, but God has it. It was made manifest on the cross when Jesus forgave those who crucified him.

We are loved by an all-merciful compassionate God. The Gospel, the “good news” tells us that God's enduring love and forgiveness is available to us all the time. What more do we need, really. Then why isn't it enough? Why doesn't the love of God seem to be enough for us?

It's been a long time since Jesus walked the earth. And even longer since Elijah did. In our first reading this morning, Elijah boldly pleads with God to restore life to the widow's son, and we read that the “Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.” Response from a loving, compassionate God. In our gospel reading, Jesus, who is more than an ordinary prophet, upon seeing the grieving widow in Nain, has compassion for her and raises her son by simply touching the bier upon which his body lay.

And the scholars impress upon us how radical these actions were for the time: for male Jews even to be talking to widows, never mind handling dead bodies, making them unclean and forced into isolation in the eyes of their tradition, never mind their having compassion and coming to the aid of the lowest level of society – widows and orphans. Widows whose very existence was imperiled by the loss of husbands, whose only hope was the future care to be given them by their sons. Sons, who were considered to be orphans despite having living mothers because their fathers were gone. Widows who lost their sons might as well be dead themselves. Both considered the lowest of the low and whose rescue by God through Elijah and through Jesus revealed the availability and power of God's love for everyone, not just the educated, not just the well-off, not just the religious rulers, but everyone.

Yes, it's been a long time since Jesus walked the earth. The status of widows has changed. Sons are not necessarily the only means of survival. But mothers still lose them and the grief is no less. They lose them to gang violence and drug wars, to AIDS and cancer and mental illness, to military service. And the longing for their return is just as intense.

Many find the most sorrowful part of Jesus' death in his mother Mary standing at the foot of the cross. Michelangelo's 15th century masterpiece sculpture La Pieta expresses the unbearable sadness of all mothers for which words prove inadequate at best.

But in 2010 we do not experience the dead being raised like they were through Elijah and Jesus and then the apostle Peter. And we ask God why not us? God hasn't changed. God still loves us with that perfect love. What's different?

What's different, my sisters and brothers in Christ, is that we have something given to us by God through Jesus' Resurrection that enables us to withstand the worst tragedies, to make it through the most terrible unexplainable episodes occurring in our lives, and that gift is our faith. Faith fills the gap between our intense sorrow and questioning and taking the next step toward healing by enabling us to accept the unfathomable and to go on. Faith in the promise revealed to us through Jesus' Resurrection that sickness, financial ruin, disasters of every type are not the end, that death is not the final answer. That's what God was showing through Elijah, what Jesus was demonstrating throughout his ministry, what Peter cemented for us in his raising Tabitha. Death is not the final answer and even it cannot separate us from the love of God.

So, is the perfect love of God enough for us? Nope, not without our faith. God can love us until the cows come home, until the end of time, but if we don't accept it and believe it, we will continue to operate in our godless human mode by looking everywhere else for nurture and comfort and satisfaction: alcohol and drugs and food and shopping and ladder-climbing and hoarding and violence to each other. But the best news is that our faith need not be perfect. Jesus said: "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

Dear friends, the love of God is eternal and it is through God's grace and our faith that it becomes real for us. God's love does not change, but what can change is our faith in it. We may not ever literally move mountains, but we will be able to move the crushing weight of hopelessness off of our chests and change our longing for what *was* to a longing for what can be.

Our faith will grow by our practicing it. By intentionally examining the way we live our lives and turning from the things which chip away at it. And it will grow by our strengthening it through prayer and contemplation, by serving others and by suspending the distractions of our busy lives to immerse ourselves in the perfect love and grace found at this table. By nurturing ourselves through the bread and the cup, by soaking up the silence, by realizing our connection to each other, and to those who have gone before us, and to those who will come after us, we are united with God through the whole and perfect Body of Christ. What greater love is there than this? May our faith reveal that it's all we need. Amen.