

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Thy Will be Done: Caring
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Exodus 2:5-10; Matthew 6:25-33

It should never have happened. It should never, ever have happened. There is no way that a Princess of Egypt should have picked up a Hebrew child, turned him over to a Hebrew nursing mother, brought him into the palace and named him, Moses, or “son.” This should never have happened for two reasons. First, it should never have happened because the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had commanded that all of his subjects, including his daughter, were to throw all newborn Hebrew boys into the Nile so that they would drown. This command was not a suggestion but an order; an order intended to, slowly but surely, eliminate the Hebrew people. The second reason the princess should not have taken the baby out of the ark in which he was floating was that the Egyptian gods couldn’t have cared less about this child. I say that because in Egyptian religion, people did not matter. They were simply pawns in the great birthing and dying sequence that played itself out generation after generation along the great river. So, our first question of the day is, “Why did the princess do it? Why did the princess save this child?”

The most obvious answer to this question seems to be given to us in the passage. In verse six: “When she opened the ark, she saw the child. He was crying and she took pity on him.” The obvious answer then, is that the princess had pity on the child. To most of us, this would seem appropriate. We have all taken pity on someone; a lost child, someone who is homeless or hungry. This answer resonates with us. Yet I would offer that this is not the correct answer. The correct answer is that the princess cared. I realize that the difference between these two words may seem like nothing more than semantics. But let me explain. Pity is a feeling. Pity is a feeling that can be elicited by any number of encounters. As I said a moment ago, it can be triggered by a lost child, hungry people, or those whose lives have been upended by natural disasters. Yet, pity is not action. Let me ask, how many of you have felt pity for someone yet not done anything about it? Caring, on the other hand, as it is used in scripture is not the emotion of someone saying to us, “I really care about you,” meaning they have feelings for us. Caring in the scripture means life-affirming **actions**.

This definition then leads us to our second question, which is, why did she care? Why was her pity turned into caring? Why was her emotional response to this child turned into action? Again, this would seem to be out of character for an Egyptian princess whose entire life had been lived in a political and religious environment in which all people, much less Hebrew people, had any particular value. Why did she care? I would argue that she cared because she was designed to care. Let me explain. When we read these stories from Exodus, we are not reading them as if they are individual tales told without context. Instead, they are part of the total package of the Torah, the first five books of the scriptures. What this means is that we are reading this story in the context of the opening story of Genesis, where God creates human beings in God’s own image. By creating us in God’s own image, God is creating human beings who are not only capable, but are designed to care because God is a caring God. In other words, if God cares about this world, meaning that God acts in life-affirming ways toward this world, then those who are created in God’s image are designed to do the same. Thus the princess was designed to engage in life-affirming actions.

This concept that God is a God who cares, who acts in life-affirming ways, is at the center of Jesus' words in the portion of the Sermon on the Mount we read this morning. What Jesus is sharing with those gathered to listen to him is that God does more than feel kindly toward God's people. God not only knows what the people need when they are hungry and afraid, but, Jesus implies, God will give it to them. God will provide. In so doing Jesus is taking these people back to the great stories of Exodus. Jesus is reminding them that God heard the cries of God's people in captivity and set them free. Jesus is reminding them that in the wilderness when the people were thirsty, God provided water and when the people were hungry, God provided quail and manna. The God that Jesus represents to those who gather on the mountain is one who cares, who engages in life-affirming actions so that God's people do not have to worry or be afraid. Instead, they can focus on striving for the Kingdom, which means being people who care, who engage in life-affirming actions.

This belief then leads to our final question of the morning. "If God cares and has designed us and empowered us to care, why is it that so many people don't care? Why is it that so many people, rather than engaging in life-affirming acts, engage in death-bringing acts?" This answer is complex and multi-faceted. For our purposes this morning I would simply say that over time, the image of God has been diminished in humanity as a whole and in human beings individually. What I mean is this ability to care has been eroded by fear, anger, hate, envy and any other negative attribute you can name. These death-dealing ways slowly but surely extinguish the image of God. Thus, when people are victims of abuse, hatred, anger or are trapped in systems that do them harm, the image of God within them can be hard to find. Yet, as John Calvin reminds us in his Institutes of the Christian Religion, the image of God is never completely extinguished. While it may go underground, it can never be fully lost and the possibility that this image can be reclaimed and with it the ability and the impetus to care is always present. The image of God is like the pilot light Cindy and I have in our gas-log fireplace. It is always on, barely seen, yet with some additional fuel, it can create a blazing fire.

This possibility, that the image of God and the call to care can be salvaged is why this church matters. For you see, we are a community of caring. We are a community that is founded upon God's caring for the world in Jesus Christ. We are a community that is constantly caring here in this building, in the community, the country, and the world. We care through life-affirming actions for those who are homeless, hungry, and in need. And by so doing, we keep the image of God alive and active in ourselves and others. We remind one another that we are to be a people who care. We encourage one another when it seems as if life is beating us down and diminishing God's image within us. So I want to thank you for being that community of caring. I want to thank you because the world needs communities like ours, that not only feel pity for those in need, but do something about it. We care.

My challenge to you for this coming week is this, to ask yourselves, how am I caring for others because the image of God is alive and well within me?