

“Good God!”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
August 24, 2008 - the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
and Based on Matthew 16:13-20
by the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

This past week, Claire Thometz came to work. Claire, you may recall, is the Grace Neighborhood Nursery School teacher whom we’ve been praying for from time to time. She’s battling breast cancer. She began her chemo and radiation treatments this past spring. In September, she’s scheduled to have the surgery, but now she was in the building taking care of last minute details before the new school year began. She will, God willing, teach this fall. “Claire!” I called out, as she went by the office. “What news?”

She was glad I called, for she’d been trying to connect with me. You see, I had written a prayer for her back in April, and it meant a lot to her. It was based on the song, “Bless, O Lord, this house we pray / Make it safe by night and day,” except, in her case I had written, “Bless our Claire, O Lord, we pray. / Make her safe by night and day. / Bless with spirits firm and stout; / Never let her fear nor doubt / Your love for her in this foray, / Fearsome even though it may / seem.” It was the sense that she was afraid, I suppose, that prompted me to do it. Kathy Grossman, the director of the nursery school, certainly was afraid. Deb, our church administrator who herself had a cancer scare a while back, also felt it. It hung in the air. So I wrote the prayer. The middle part—the part that came after the line “Fearsome even though it may / seem”—began “O Lord, Supreme: / You who made the earth and seas, / All living things, the bees, their knees, / She’s our Claire and, if you please, / Send abroad this dread disease / To the far Antipodes, / Bound for all eternities.” And then the coda-like ending, “Bless her now that we may be / Ever singing praise to Thee. / Choicest of all the brunettes, / We commend our Claire Thometz. Amen.”

I am glad that my wife, Elaine, who has not seen this poem, is up at Clearwater Camp this morning along with all the other Chrysalis women. I would have a tough time explaining the line “Choicest of all the brunettes” to her.

But really! What other word would you choose to rhyme with Thometz?

Well, Claire said she kept that prayer posted in a prominent place throughout the summer. It became a kind of talisman for her, a thing to ward off the evil that threatened. It was more than that, of course. It was a heartfelt prayer addressed to Almighty God. “Send abroad this dread disease,” it said, and do it not only for her sake, but for ours as well. She was part of our community, and our community needs reasons to give thanks. “Bless her now,” it said, “that *we* may be / Ever singing praise to Thee.”

So there we were, the two us, standing out in the hallway by the bulletin board,

and she was beaming. “I’ve been anxious to see you,” she said: “Just yesterday I went to the doctor’s to get the results of my last scan before the surgery. I’m done with the treatments—I’m so glad they’re over!—and now I got the news.” “And...!?!?” “The doctor said, ‘It’s gone! There are no signs of the cancer! Nothing showed up on the scan!’” Claire could hardly believe it. I could hardly believe it! It’s one thing to cry to the Lord; it’s another thing altogether to get an answer—and this answer especially, the one you most dearly hope for but cannot be certain it will come. Oh, I did write, “Send abroad this dread disease / To the far Antipodes, / Bound for all eternities.” But I confess: I was ‘whistling in the dark.’ I wrote better than I knew. I do know the words to the great affirmations of God’s goodness and power: “I believe in one God the Father Almighty; maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God”—the opening words of the Nicene Creed. Or, if you prefer, which I do, the United Church of Christ’s great, “We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify.” Yes, Lord, I do believe, but help Thou my unbelief!

So here I am testifying to his deeds. I believe God had something to do with Claire’s good news...!

Sounds awful, doesn’t it? “Something to do with Claire’s good news...”! You’d think I was apologizing, or at best declaring a happy coincidence had taken place but nothing more. And yet, something more had taken place. We had prayed for a miracle, and Claire clung to that prayer, and a miracle did happen. Oh, she was not willing to not have the surgery. She wasn’t saying that. She was saying, or trying to say, at any rate, that the prayer and her good news were linked. She had been blessed, the dread disease was sent packing. And now, nearly overcome with emotion, we were both whispering. “It’s wonderful!” “Yes!” “I’m so happy for you!” “Yes!!!”

Is this Peter’s “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”?

On the face of it, no. Neither the word ‘Jesus’, nor ‘Christ’, nor ‘Son of the living God’ ever appeared in my prayer or Claire’s good news. And yet I confess to you here now with conviction that the two are linked. To proclaim the goodness of God is to proclaim Jesus, the Messiah. How is that so—not to mention, why should it matter?

It matters because Jesus is how you and I learned about God, and about the goodness of God above all. We are not Buddhists, or Hindus, or Jews, or Muslims, or any of the other revelations about who God is. We are Christians, some nominally so, others more convinced, and others still trying out the idea. This is not a value judgment, by the way; it’s not saying that any one of these affirmations are good or bad. It’s simply saying we have a hard time talking about God without talking about Jesus too. What is God like? Jesus said he’s like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers in his vineyard. Is God powerful? Yes, Jesus went about curing every disease and every sickness. Does God care for us? Yes, Jesus had compassion for ‘the least of these.’ Can God do something about the ‘final enemy’? Yes, Jesus, God raised from the dead!

This is what we talk about when we talk about God: we talk about Jesus.

But every now and then, we do more than talk about him. We say, “You are the

Christ!” I daresay we do not always recognize that we are saying this. Nevertheless, I affirm that we are saying that Jesus is not merely one useful guide in a whole shopping center of guides, every one of them ready and eager to help us in our efforts to understand God and what comes next, when we die. Jesus is the One, we are saying. Jesus is “God with us,” Emmanuel; the look-no-further, full revelation of who God is and what he expects of us—the very embodiment of that revelation. And when we say that, we are saying, “You, Jesus, are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

It’s not a confession we fully grasp or hold tightly to, no more so than did Peter—Peter who at one moment could be the rock on which Jesus would build his church, and at another moment would sink like a rock in the sea of Galilee. The gospel of Matthew is under no illusions when it comes to the fragility of the disciples’ faith.

But even a fragile faith whispered in the halls of a church can be a powerful thing. It is speaking better than we know. It is the Spirit of God at work in us, doing its best to find the words—I picture the Spirit rummaging through our treasure chests and saying, “Aren’t there any useful words here? Ooh, there’s one! Where did that come from; that’s no good. How about this? I can use this.” And along with the words, I picture the Spirit conceding the speechless lumps that well up in our throats. They all proclaim the glory of God. What they leave out, the Spirit fills in. We remain conduits, happy to channel this life-saving good news. “It’s wonderful!” “Yes!” “I’m so happy for you!” “Yes!!!”

In the summary that appears in your bulletin, I talked about this work as a calling worthy of our highest ambitions. I’m now inclined to say that’s not quite right. If it is a calling, it is not to exercise our talents, but to entrust our faith wholly—entirely, that is—to the One who deserves it: Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God.

You’re it, Jesus! You really are.

Amen.