

A sermon preached by the Rev. Elaine Fennell at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 20, 2010.

“When Jesus Shows Up, Everything Changes”

Isaiah 65:1-9; Luke 8:26-29

Today and always, the Lord be with you! Loving and gracious God, Lord of Lords we thank you for this moment to stand and proclaim your word. Take my heart, mind, soul and spirit and make it yours. Empty me of my human motives. Now, speak through me the words you will speak to your people. For I am your vessel and your handmaiden. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

I would like to say, “Happy Father’s Day” today to my husband, all of our fathers in attendance and all of our fathers in waiting. Thank you all for the gifts of love, security and protection that you have given to your children. In fact, I’d like to posthumously dedicate this time in the Spirit to my father, Dave Davis, Sr. Lord knows if he were alive, he would never have come to church to sit among this congregation to hear me preach the word of God, but because Jesus showed up in my life, I can stand today and say I love you Dad.

And, today is a fitting time to testify to this Daddy journey in my life. I always believe that God gives us a test in our lives so that we can give our testimony. It is a testimony that just might help someone on their journey, because nothing has beset me or you that has not been felt or experienced by some other person in this life.

In our Old Testament reading today, the prophet Isaiah is speaking in the Spirit of God. He seems to be reflecting on the bondage of Israel and the return of Israel to Jerusalem after being exiled. Isaiah speaks as a father speaks to his child remembering his child's rebellion. In those first verses, he says, "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not seek me" (65:1). God is always there in our lives. Just like I always knew my Dad was there, but I never sought him out because I was his child, rebellious and selfish. I was given to him by God, kind of like God birthed Israel. Yet, my father like God "held out his hands all day long" through provision and security. But as a child I did not understand or have the knowledge I needed to understand what the heck was going on.

You see my Dad was an alcoholic, in denial until his death. He died at age 75 on April 8, 1999. The cause of death is listed as a blood infection. He had been on dialysis for a few years before his death. He suffered this complication brought on by diabetes and a refusal to change his lifestyle.

That's looking at the Isaiah text in a different way when I relate it to my Dad's behavior. "I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good." Dad's rebellion and journey was not good for him, and it certainly wasn't good for his family. He sought no redemption for his behavior and dysfunction. In his selfish addiction, he thought he was alone, but he was not alone. God was always there waiting to be revealed. My father's addiction and unwillingness to surrender to God permeated our family negatively through financial woes, violence and abuse.

But, the Good News is, God showed up anyway. I had a praying mother who stuck with this man. I had a mother who gave her life to God and latched on to a love that never lets you go. God's grace was never more evident when I reflect on my childhood then when I think about my Dad and Mom. A

relationship that says we are together and I will carry you even in the hard times. It's a Godly love that creeps into our important commitments to the important people in our lives. It's a love that won't let you go or let you down.

I grew up during the 1950s and '60s. A time when the television program *Father Knows Best* and other family programs painted an idyllic picture of men in the roles of father. As a child of an alcoholic, you can imagine the stigma and labels that I was subjected to by my peers. Also, this was a time when services for alcohol and drug dependency were emerging; and it was a time when there was a negative socio-economic stigma that was growing against alcoholism. Because of lack of knowledge, we didn't know the name of this family demon that was destroying our family and other families. Drinking was all around me in my childhood. It was the norm for my father's family. But the problem for Dad came when other family members changed their behavior, but Dad was stuck, sucked into the demon of alcohol. When Daddy got stuck, we all grew in a different way. We were the original dysfunctional family.

I know now that even in his human brokenness, his alcoholism and mental instability, Dad's tremendous struggle to look beyond his pain and addiction to fulfill the role as provider for our family is still something that touches my heart. It's where I find Dad's love for us in the midst of his messy life addiction. We were a family that was wounded and making our own way through the brokenness of our dysfunctional home.

But as Isaiah recounts, "Thus says the Lord, as the wine is found in the cluster, and they say 'Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it.' " (65:8) God's grace showed up. Jesus showed up in our lives in the shape of my mother. Warnell O'Neal Davis, my Mother's turning to God, her prayers, her struggles and her victory over my Dad's demon of alcohol and mental illness was her children's salvation.

James Baldwin, in his book *The Fire Next Time* says, “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile – sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.

It was Mother’s quest through her ferocious love of God that broke the bondage of fear of the demon of alcohol in our home and showed us the way to salvation. It was naming the demon and giving it to God that reminds me of Jesus’ healing of the demoniac that we find in the gospel reading of Luke 8 today. When Jesus showed up in our household, the devil had to go. It changed our lives forever.

Paul’s letter to the Galatians says, “Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed.” (3:23) You see we (my brothers and I) were introduced to faith in God by Mother, but as children God guarded us under the law until Mother’s faith was revealed. We were introduced to hope in God and God’s immeasurable grace in our lives when Jesus showed up through Mother’s faith. We were introduced to the ability to change our circumstances through faith because our salvation came by grace through our faith in God. It was through faith that I took my eyes off the imperfection of our family and saw the vision of God’s beloved kingdom.

But nothing comes in life without a struggle. God did not promise us a rose garden. The Bible says in this life there will be trials and tribulations. The rejection of peers, mental abuse, sometimes actual physical abuse for speaking up, or standing up for what is right in your life are the consequences of change. But for Christ I live and for Christ I die. I’m with Paul. There comes a time when Jesus shows up, and you will have to name your demon, your problem, your issue, your broken place. We all have them. When you do name this obstacle that is keeping you from God, you will make a choice

to let go and let God lead the way when you are at the end of yourself and there is nothing left for you to do. It's a process, it's a journey, but when Jesus shows up in your life, believe it, problems get solved, demons will flee, healing will happen.

Paula Ripple, from her book *Growing Strong at Broken Places* says, "Tension is God's gift to us, a gift that sometimes will not permit us to escape its presence." I believe that our creative energies are activated by just that kind of upsetting tension. It is in responding to this gnawing discomfort that we have the possibility of giving shape to dreams that are at once faithful to who we are and who we can become.

Humankind will fail you but God never will. It is through the eyes of faith that I see my Dad saved by God's grace. It is through love that I stand here today, reconciled to the past, knowing that my Dad did the best he could just like we all do in our lives. Knowing that when Jesus shows up in our lives that it's time for the demons to go and a miracle change will happen.

To the fathers and families celebrating Father's Day today, no matter what you may or may not be dealing with in your life today God is in control. Maybe you know someone who needs to know this very thing, maybe they need to have this very hope. Then let Jesus show up for them through you. Tell them the story that a relationship with Jesus can change your life and the lives of those around you. Tell the truth about your issues and problems. Share your wretched moments with those you care for you.

I've been created by God for you and God created you for me. We are created to bring God's beloved kingdom on earth by loving one another. Loving each other in even the hard times of life is not easy. But if you truly love them you will go the extra mile. Love will shame the devil, and the truth will set you free, even though it will hurt your feelings first.

So, I give you this one simple thought to remember always when Jesus shows up everything changes for the better. Let Jesus show up in your life. God is ever seeking a deeper relationship with you. To our fathers and parents, I ask you to do the best you can for your children, and let God do the rest. Your children will not forget. Remember, “We will not only be remembered by our words, but by our kind deeds. Life is not measured by the breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath.” Amen.

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