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Texts: Matthew 7: 24-27; Romans 8: 31-39; Hebrews 6: 19-20

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“The Depth Dimension of Existence”

A year and a half ago I shared with you what happened when Rachael and I were due to drop our daughter Sabina off for her first year of college. First, I got Covid and then Rachael got Covid, and so Sabina and Elsa had to drive off to Ithaca on their own. They were met there by Rachael’s mother, who helped them get Sabina’s dorm room set up. Rachael and I followed a little later when we felt better. And then on the day of my 50th birthday, August 22nd, we said goodbye, and we drove away. We had celebrated earlier, and I felt plenty cared for - but it was a lousy day.

It was also a memorable day. It was one of the most emotional moments that I’ve experienced as a parent. I have to tell you I’m not really prepared to go through it again with Elsa, and then with Augie. There in the parking lot, Rachael and I stood for a long time watching our daughter walk away. And here’s the image I’ll hold onto forever: when she was preparing to turn a corner, she turned one last time and waved. And then that was that, she was gone, and with her, a whole era of our lives.

(So ok, she’s coming home later this week, and I’d be a liar if I said anything other than I can’t wait.)

Standing there on that August afternoon, my mind drifted back to another momentous day, when Rachael and I drove home from the hospital with our newborn daughter. We were in New Haven, and it was an overcast day in early June. I had pulled the car around, and I was stressed about securing the base of the baby seat. We had learned that a police officer would actually come and do it for us if we wished, which made it sound both very difficult and very serious, like some great harm would befall our daughter if we made a mistake. And I did not wish to make a mistake.

It turns out it wasn’t so hard to secure the base after all, but as young parents we still felt anxious as we placed our baby daughter into that new car seat, arranging cushions and blankets so that nothing could jar her. After that, we locked the seat into the base, hearing it click into place. We made sure it was stable, and then we arranged ourselves in the front. It was time to go home. I carefully steered the car into the traffic around Yale New Haven Hospital. Sabina was in the nest of her chair, and we were in the bubble of our car, and I remember feeling hyper aware of everything out there that could harm this precious and fragile being. And I felt reassured by all the layers between Sabina and the traffic outside - the blankets, the cushion, the seat, the car itself. It felt like a kind of enveloping love, a love that I hoped would protect and shield her from harm.

Eighteen years later, that memory took on a new resonance. Because over time, the nest of blankets and pillows within the car seat - what I imagined as an enveloping love - had been transformed into a different kind of quest: to instill in her, and in each of our children, a sense of confidence, a sense of security, a sense of self and personhood that she could draw upon even when there were bad days, even when things weren't going especially well. I wanted our kids - but in that particular moment, Sabina - to have a rock solid assurance of how loved she was, so that even when she experienced rejection or disappointment or pain, and even when all the chaos that we as parents try to keep at bay for our children, even when that did somehow intrude, she would have the inner resources she needed in order to be ok, and maybe even to thrive.

Now hang on to that image - of a place deep down in the core of one's own being, where we know ourselves to be loved, and cared for, and held. That inner space has become central not only to my understanding of parenting, but also to my understanding of theology and of preaching, of prayer and of this endeavor we call church. It has everything to do with all of us gathered here today. Getting at that requires another story.

Right around the time Sabina was born, I was beginning a deep dive into 19th century German theology and philosophy, a deep dive that would last for another four years. I read the work of a man named Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was the architect of a modern, liberal theology, a way of thinking about God that made sense of Christian faith amidst all the changes of science and technology, without having to ignore or reject those changes. Writing in Berlin in 1799 to a fashionable audience that he called "the cultured despisers of religion" - those who had grown too sophisticated to believe all those old dogmas about God, Schleiermacher shifted the ground, saying that religion wasn't first and foremost about believing in a God somewhere "out there." Instead, he said that "religion was the feeling of absolute dependence." Not a belief in this or that creed, not an assent to this or that biblical story, but an inner intuition of something profound, of being dependent, maybe not unlike Sabina in her car seat on that first ride home.

It took me a long time to understand what that phrase meant. I worried for a while that it might be infantilizing in a way. In time, though, an image formed in my mind, which grew from my experience as a young parent. It was of the human psyche - the soul, if you will - as a kind of ocean or sea with different levels of activity - the surface, then a kind of sub-marine layer where light still reaches, and then the layer of the deep, way down below.

Think about the surface first. Up there, the waters fluctuated. If you were to watch that surface across time, you would see periods of placid stillness, when it seemed like there wasn't much happening. But there would also be times when the waters would churn, stirred by powerful winds. And at other times still, you would see dramatic storms, with violent waves capable of capsizing sailors who ventured upon those waters.

And I began to imagine that surface as reflective of the events that take place throughout our lives, and the way they can toss us about. A churn of the waves would be akin to the strong emotions we might feel around an event - maybe we've been criticized, maybe we've fallen in love, maybe we're

dealing with a form of rejection. Usually, that sort of wave calms down before too long. Storms on the other hand would be akin to the major life events that rock us - a death or an illness or some other upheaval. Each of those events stirs the water far below the surface, sometimes quite a ways down, affecting us profoundly. Still, up there at the surface and the middle layers of this inner ocean, we're in a world of constant change and fluctuation.

But in this ocean of the human soul, it's possible to go down to a very deep place, where all that roils and churns up above does not reach. This is a place of calm and stillness far far beneath the waves. Whatever is happening down there is related to what's happening up above, but it's not tossed about by every gust of wind. This is the space within us where our deepest and most primary memories are stored - where we feel loved, or not; held, or not; cared for, or not, in a way that transcends whatever is happening up at the surface.

This is the place that parents are trying to reach when their children are infants, when they hold and cradle and sing to them. And this is also the place that we as parents are trying to reach when we wish to build a sense of confidence and well being within our children that will carry them through a lifetime. It's what I hoped had taken root as Rachael and I watched Sabina walk away from us that day in August. This is the work that all of us, as parents, as caregivers, as friends, as people of faith, are given to do for one another: to create that deep sense of assurance and well being for those around us, as best we are able.

When Schleiermacher said that religion is the feeling of absolute dependence, I think he was referring to that same part deep down inside of us, where we feel held and loved as if we were but a tiny child. Some part of us shall always be that tiny child that we once were. To experience the feeling of absolute dependence, where religion is located according to Schleiermacher, would be to learn how to trust, with absolute assurance, that no matter what is happening up there on the surface, that no matter what waves or storms or hurricanes are roiling the oceans of our lives, that way deep down we are cradled by a Love that will not depart from us. It is that unshakeable core that the Apostle Paul wrote about in those ecstatic words from Romans 8, when he says that neither life nor death, neither sword nor famine, neither angels nor rulers, that nothing, nothing, can separate us from the love of God shown to us in Christ Jesus.

Is this not precisely what God is trying to do for each of us - to create a sense of confidence so deep and so lasting that no storm will shake us? The metaphor is slightly different, of course, but when Jesus tells his parable of the man who built his house on sandy ground, the effect is similar. Whether because of his own neglect or because of what he had or had not been offered in the course of his life, the man's foundations don't seek deep enough below the surface of things to support him. And so when a storm arises, it washes his house away. What Jesus seems to be offering, what God seems to be offering through Jesus, is a foundation running deep enough to be secure. To switch back to my original metaphor of the ocean, Jesus is reaching into that place within us that is fathoms below the roiling surface of the sea, a place where the waves do not reach. He reaches that place by becoming Emmanuel, God with us, promising to walk with us through the darkest valley, promising to sit with us

through the longest night, promising never to leave or to forsake us, promising to seek us out in the locked upper rooms of our fear. That is, I believe, the very essence of what is happening in Christian faith: God in Christ becomes a kind of holy diver, swimming toward the deep places within each of us, helping us to know that we are held and cared for by a Love that will not let us go.

Say all of that is true. Say that this story, of God as a diver into the deep, is one that you, like me, are learning to trust. Say all that is so. If it were true, a number of implications would follow.

First, it would mean that it's possible to ride out the wind and the waves up above with a kind of confidence that others may not understand. And it would mean having the freedom to confront some of the more unpleasant features of the world without turning away, or fearing what others might say or think. Because God only knows there are things up there at the surface that require our attention - our families, our jobs, our friendships, the large and small currents of news and information that shape our days. There are things with which we simply must deal in order to be responsible and mature people of conscience. Having that deep sense of assurance, way on down in the ocean of our souls, allows us to move across those wind swept waters without fear. In personal terms, for example, it may mean possessing the confidence to have difficult conversations, and to enter emotionally vulnerable places with others, having a sense of assurance that there is a greater love holding us all. At the level of a church, it may mean being willing to take risks, and to steer into some of the more turbulent waters of our public life, precisely because there is a strong assurance of being held by that greater love. We can be bold if we possess that inner sense of trust, way deep down. The feeling of absolute dependence, in other words, grounds our ability to be in the world, allowing the freedom for an effective social witness.

Second, it may take practice in order to learn how to trust that core, way down in the deep of our souls. We may have to nurture and build that part of ourselves when others can't. It's true that parents can only do so much, and we only have a limited time to do it. Not only that, we're flawed - sometimes that deep sense of trust hasn't been instilled within us, and so we don't always know how to give it to others. And then sometimes there are events within our lives that reach pretty far down into the deep, disturbing what equilibrium might be there. That's when having some form of spiritual practice becomes essential. Some people get there through the work of prayer or contemplation. Others meditate, or do yoga. Some of us gather for worship in a place like this, to sing and to pray and to reflect with others. Some of us use silence, or reading, or walking to get in touch with the depths. But it requires a certain amount of practice to access the place of stillness where God seeks us out. Even so, it does lie within us, and God does seek us within those places. Human relationships often fail, but there is a Loving Presence that seeks to find us and hold us in the places that others cannot fully reach.

Even if we can't or don't always reach the places that God can reach, this reality entails that we have a certain responsibility before one another. And this is the third implication. It's not just parents and children, or ministers and congregants. All of us have a role to play in nurturing that inner core within one another. It's especially true of our closest relationships.

I just finished reading George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* for the second time, and I think that when it comes time to bury me - somebody remember this, please - I'd like to have that book resting upon my heart. It's so perceptive, so wise, and so compassionate. In one scene, a husband and wife who are ill suited to one another, and who do not really understand one another, sit in a bed. The woman, Dorothea, places her hand on her husband's arm, trying to find a way toward him, a place across the chasm that separates them. He bristles, and withdraws his arm. Eliot writes, "It is in these acts called trivialities that the seeds of joy are forever wasted, until men and women look round with haggard faces at the devastation their own waste has made, and say, the earth bears no harvest of sweetness."

Conversely, a lifetime of giving and receiving such small acts of tenderness and care may be the very things that reach past the shallows and toward the depths, creating an abiding sense of well being deep in our very core. Do not underestimate the cumulative effects in a life of such small kindnesses, for they may, as Eliot puts it late in the novel, be incalculably diffusive.

Let me return once again to that scene a year and a half ago, in Ithaca. As we watched Sabina walk away from us, and then disappear from sight, I found myself offering a simple prayer: "God, please be with her. May she know how loved she is. May she know that she is held, deep down in her soul. Let all that we have done be enough." So far as I can tell, it is a prayer that has been answered.

As our world churns with images of chaos, waves that steadily beat upon us, my prayer for you, for all of us, is much the same: may the love we celebrate and proclaim here every week find you in the deepest parts of your being. May you know that in the midst of it all, God is holding you.