

The Ballad of the Absent Father

A Sermon by David Barker

February 5, 2012

Scripture: Isaiah 49:8-16a

Matthew 6:24-34

In 1923, Wilson Follett gave his eight-year-old daughter Barbara a typewriter

- Wilson Follett was a literary critic and an editor...Barbara a little girl who'd been consumed by words as soon as she could speak
 - writing 65-page short stories by the age of five, poetry by seven
- but receiving the typewriter, Barbara embarked on a novel
 - she locked herself in her room for hours each day, and produced a 40,000-word tome she entitled *The House Without Windows*
- a reasonably amazing accomplishment for a child, but more amazing still: the first publisher who read the novel, published it
- at age 12, Barbara was receiving rave reviews...reviews that writers in their 30s, 40s, and 50s, having written and published all their adult lives, would've killed to receive:
 - "a truly remarkable book" *New York Times*
 - "almost unbearably beautiful" *Saturday Review of Literature*
- soon, people the stature of H. L. Mencken were speaking of Barbara as not just a child prodigy of astonishing gifts but as the next great American novelist

- but then Barbara's father Wilson turned 40
 - he arrived home one evening, gathered his wife and daughter together in the living room and said, I'm leaving...he'd found a younger woman
- and when Wilson left, he *left*...no money, no support, no being there...Wilson was simply gone

- Barbara was devastated...her father had always been there, always her biggest fan, always her greatest source of support...now he was gone, and she was lost
- Barbara continued to write as best she could, to publish
 - but the days of hours spent locked in her room, the carriage of her typewriter sailing back and forth, were over
 - instead, she spent hours looking for a job...anything to pay the bills
- but life, for Barbara, so blessed, so secure when her father was there, looking after her, was, once he left, never the same

So it was that on December 7, 1939, with thirty dollars in her pocket, Barbara Newhall Follett, age 25, walked out of her tiny apartment, and disappeared

--Barbara, like her father, was simply gone

Common are the images throughout the Old Testament of God as wrathful, vengeful, jealous...willing to wipe-out entire populations in the name of judgment or advancing the Divine agenda

--but there are images, too, of an extraordinary poignancy...as in our passage from Isaiah this morning...of a God who loves and cares for God's children as a mother loves and cares for her nursing child

--of a God Who, no matter what, will never forget God's children, their very names written on the palms of God's hands

--of a God Who knows and will meet every need of God's children

--a God who is *there*...not *gone*, not *absent*...not a God who abandons you...a God who is *there*...*always* there

When Wilson Follett was present in his daughter's life...

--she needn't worry about anything because he, Wilson, provided everything...he knew what Barbara needed and saw to it that it was taken care of

--freed of worrying, Barbara could focus on the work for which she was gifted, to which she was called

--but...Wilson Follett, *absent* from Barbara's life...life became nothing but worries ...and what, to all appearances, was intended to be the real work of Barbara's life...it, too, like Wilson himself, went away

The God Who is forever here, Who knows and supplies our every need, freeing us to do the work for which we're gifted, to which we're called...

--and yet most of us tend to live as if one day, God called us together in the living room and said, I'm leaving

--as if life for us now is nothing but worries...where will we get what we need, not just today but tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that?

Jesus knows that's how we live...be in this world, Jesus says, not of it, but Jesus knows: we tend to live as if God has left...many as if God was never here

--that's why, I suspect, in what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, the longest extended ethical teachings of Jesus we possess...Jesus describes life as God intended it to be lived

--life apart from worry about worldly things that we might, instead, be a blessing to the world...living as children of an ever-present, never-absent God

--central to Jesus' teachings is verses 24-34 of chapter 6, where Jesus addresses what, one way or another, is at the source of most of our worldly worrying: *money*

--you cannot, Jesus says very matter-of-factly, serve both wealth—the world—and God...what's more, you don't have to

--God knows what you need and because you are infinitely more valuable to God than those creatures God feeds everyday, you can take it to the bank that God will provide for you

--don't worry your Heavenly Father will not be there, Jesus says, will not give you everything you need

--instead, put that energy into the work to which you're called

--the key, Jesus tells us, is this:

Strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Jesus' admonition begs two questions: what is the "Kingdom of God" for which we should be striving and what, precisely, are "these things"?

--"Kingdom of God" isn't the easiest of terms to pin down

--Jesus uses it frequently, in a number of different contexts...so, too, does the apostle Paul

--but this much we can say with certainty: to speak of the Kingdom of God is to speak of creation as reflecting God's will...creation, in other words, as God intends creation to be: "thy will," we pray, "done on earth as it is in heaven"

--"Kingdom of God," therefore, ultimately means life on earth defined by the values and priorities and assumptions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ...that upside down, inside out, the last shall be first, the first shall be last thinking absolutely contrary, let's face it, to what the world typically demands

--and it's certain, too, that God's will for the Kingdom is that it not come about solely as the result of Divine initiative

--we play a part, you and I, the Kingdom coming, too, through *our* efforts...how we live, what we value...the work for which we're gifted, the work to which we're called

--and "these things" ...precisely what are "these things"?

--Jesus tells us: what you will eat, what you will drink, what you will wear
...material security...the very things, frankly, we exert our greatest
energies to acquire and hold on to...the very things about which we
worry most

*Strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be
given to you as well.*

--what Jesus is saying, I think, is this: "Your Heavenly Father knows what you
need and worry most about, but if you will focus not on *that*, but on the
Kingdom, not only will the work of the Kingdom get done, but all your needs
will be met"

--all your needs, all the time, because God is *not* absent...God is here

Now we need to be clear: this is not an invitation to godly loafing...

--not a mandate to assume, if God will meet my every need, I need not lift a
finger...I don't even need to get a real job...I'll just tell people about Jesus

--nowhere in Scripture does it say, "God helps those who help themselves" but
it's a sentiment Jesus likely would've embraced

--God's grace to us is not dependent on anything we do or don't do, but
surely there is the expectation that we live *into* that grace, honoring it
by shouldering the responsibility of using our gifts, our lives in service
to the Kingdom

It is, perhaps, in the end a matter of *trust*

--in a perfect world there would be no absent fathers...no absent mothers, no
absent children, no absent spouses, no absent friends

--but the world is not perfect, *we* are not perfect...wherever you look, it isn't
difficult to find a Wilson Follett

--yet the fact *we're* not perfect is precisely why Jesus *is*

--in Jesus Christ, a world of absent fathers resulting in worrying children is
reminded: God is *not* gone...God is *here*...this moment, and for all
moments to come...

--reminded that in a world where all in which we trust to protect us, to
provide for us can disappear in the length of time it takes someone to
walk out the door, the one thing, the *only* thing, we can count on
always and forever, is Jesus

--it isn't that we shouldn't trust one another...we must trust one another...our
lives, the world—they cannot function apart from trust

--but each of us, in our rooms, the carriage of our typewriter sailing back
and forth...our *ultimate* trust is to be in the ultimate source

For 15 years after that December night Barbara walked out of her tiny apartment and disappeared, people tried to find her

--even her father, Wilson, miraculously reappeared to look for her, but it was too little too late: Barbara, just like Wilson, had vanished

--and Wilson himself, unable to find his daughter, vanished once more

--life as God intended it to be lived, as children of an ever-present, never-absent God, apart from worry about worldly things that we might, instead, be a blessing to the world...

--work for which she was gifted, to which she was called...but as far as anyone knows, Barbara Newhall Follett, the next great American novelist who vanished into the night 72 years ago, never wrote another word

--and to this day, for any who wonder what happened to her, God, the One who never left, is the only one who knows