

Aug 5 – Count on Others (Take a Hand)

Isaiah 41: 8-10

Today we finish our look at the spiritual truths children can teach us. The scripture I read today was a prophetic word of hope to the people of Israel at a very challenging time. They had been taken into exile. They wondered if God cared about them. Isaiah, in this chapter, sets the scene as if Israel is in a courtroom where they, the defendants, are worried about the outcome of the trial. Those who oppose them seem so strong and powerful. God says, “Do not fear, because I am with you, don’t be afraid, for I am your God and I will strengthen you, I will surely help you, I will hold you with my righteous strong hand.” Holding a hand, gives a child strength and confidence. Let me share a part of a story from a book “Safed and Keturah” written by a Congregational Church pastor sharing insights from his life in the style of an Old Testament Prophet.

The daughter of the daughter of Keturah (that is her granddaughter) hath a little friend who cometh to see her, and playeth with her in the yard. And mostly they play very happily but now and then, for the sake of variety, they indulge in argument and comparison like grown folk. And it was upon a day that they got thus into a friendly scrap, the first part of which I heard not. But the argument had reached a stage where the daughter of the daughter of Keturah was advancing and backing the other little damsel off the map, and the other little girl could only answer, I did not, or you can not, or it is not.

And the daughter of the daughter of Keturah said, “I can walk fifty-nine miles.” And the other little girl said, “You cannot.” And the daughter of the daughter of Keturah said, I can take my grandpa’s hand and keep up with him, and he can walk fifty-nine miles, and I can walk fifty nine miles with him if I hold his hand. And the other little damsel said, “You cannot.”

Then did the daughter of the daughter of Keturah tell unto the other little girl how great and good a grandpa she had. And I am too modest a man to write down what she said, but if George Washington and Solomon and a few others were to live in one, he might be a second cousin or a remote acquaintance of a man such as she described.

And the other little girl was speechless for the daughter of the daughter of Keturah had carried the matter beyond all comparison. So the other little girl changed the subject.

This is what he said about this incident: *Apart from her beautiful delusion concerning the poor man concerning whom I pray my God that she may be never undeceived, the little maiden is not wholly wrong. For when she holdeth my hand she can do things which otherwise she could not do. And I prayed unto my God a prayer and I said, “O my God, thou hast*

permitted us through the gift of little lives such as these to discern spiritual truths which thou hast hid from the wise and prudent and revealed unto babes. Grant unto me this that I shall hold so fast to thine hand that the journey that would others-wise be impossible shall be possible for me, and the task that would have been too great may be accomplished through thy strength. For I can do all things through him that strengthens me and if I hold thy hand I can run and not be weary, and walk and not faint.”

This leads me to remember three important truths. The first of these is that we need to take hold of another’s hand when we are in difficult times. Isaiah uses this image when God says I will hold you in my strong righteous hand. This is a call to trust in another’s strength when ours might fail. In that story, the daughter of the daughter of Keturah knew she could walk fifty-nine miles. All she would have to do is hold her grandpa’s hand. Holding his hand would give her the strength and support she needed for that journey. Children remember something that we sometimes forget. We are strongest in community. This is a truth I see lived out over and over. It is one of the most powerful parts of belonging to a church. When we are going through tough times we never do it alone. People call, send cards, offer prayers and help out in any way they can. Their support gives us the strength to handle, with grace, whatever life is dishing out to us.

It saddens me when someone in the church shares with me some particularly difficult thing they are going through and asks me to keep it confidential. They want no one to know. Sometimes, I understand the reason. Other times it feels like misplaced pride. They don’t want others to know they are in need of help. They struggle to do it all by themselves. They might succeed in getting through that tough time but it would have been so much better if they had allowed others to care about them.

I think about times I have seen this lived out. I recall in one of my congregations two people going through relatively similar experiences. In both cases the women had undergone surgery and would be laid up for several weeks. In one instance she let her friends know what was happening, asking for their prayers. And, since it was the church, she got more than prayers, she got visits, and cards and some dinners. She and her husband were extremely grateful. They talked often about how loved they felt. In the other instance, she had surgery. She did not let anyone know, not even me, her pastor. I only learned about it when they had missed a couple of Sundays and I called to check in. He told me what happened but let me

know that she did not want anyone to know about it. When they finally got back to church, he talked about how hard it had been doing all the care giving. She was proud of the fact that they handled it, didn't even need their kids help, but it was a challenging time for them. It was an endurance contest and not a time filled with love and grace. Which one, do you think, was following the word of God? So, learn from a child and be willing to reach out your hand and you will find such strength as you never knew you had, the strength perhaps to walk fifty-nine miles.

The second thing that occurs when we count on others is that there is wisdom beyond us. Children learn this from a very early age as every adult tells them what to do. It gets maddening for them and so they begin to pull back, to not listen. Too often, we continue to pull back until we are isolated and again feeling like we have to go it alone, make all of the decisions ourselves. How much better when we are willing to listen and see the wisdom that surrounds us, if we are just willing to be open. Now I realize we have to evaluate what we hear because not everything someone tells us is actually wise and insightful! But, I think about those who have mentored me in my ministry. My father was a great resource and one of the sad parts, to me, about his death was that I no longer could call him for advice. He was very wise when it came to ministry.

Reaching out to others is a sign of strength not of weakness. Too often people are ashamed to admit they need or went to a counselor. They come in to see me apologetic that they had to ask for some help. Yet I find that when I am in uncharted waters the best thing I could do is ask for advice, to bounce ideas off of someone else. When I count on others I am not disappointed and find I am better and stronger and wiser than if I had tried to do it myself. We continue to help our grandchildren to know they need to listen and learn instead of just reacting. This is something they do well most of the time and something we can learn from them as well.

Finally, as Isaiah states, know God is with us and we are never alone. They were told not to fear because God is with them. Remember the image of the courtroom. They were afraid because those against them seemed so powerful. God says, "I am right there with you, you have nothing to fear." This awareness that God is with us even in the darkest of times is

such good news. It allows us the strength we need to handle things. We can do all things through God who strengthens us.

I think about a couple whose child was diagnosed with a cancerous tumor along his spinal column. The plan of treatment was three months of radiation five days a week and then surgery. She worked in the schools as an aide and he was a farmer. They lived about a hundred miles from the radiation center. There was no way they could take off that much time. She would have lost her job, he would not have been able to keep the farm going. They came to me with fear and a sense of hopelessness. To save their son she would lose her job, income desperately needed because the farm did not support them because they were still buying the land, or he would have to sell out and who knew if he would get a job that would take care of them. We prayed together about their situation and then I asked for permission to share their story at church. As soon as I finished someone stood up and said, "I will take him for treatments some of the time," another did the same, another said, "I will give some of my sick leave to her," and another said, "I will help out on his farm." The list went on. Before coffee hour was done there was a schedule for all three months of drivers, of help on the farm, of meals for the family and sick leave pledged when the boy was not doing well and only wanted mom to take him. At the finish of treatment the tumor was so shrunken that it came out easily in surgery and I learned a couple years ago that he has had no relapse, is now married and has a family of his own. What was impossible was made possible through community. They all felt God was with them every step of the way.

SO know that you are never alone. God upholds you with God's strong and righteous hand and if you reach out you will find the strength you need.