

"CONTROL, PERFECTION, AND PEACE OF MIND"

Larry I. Palmer

Genesis 22: 1-18
Mark 14: 32-36
Corinthians I 15: 51-52

April 18, 1982

I. Introduction

A few months ago, my wife Jo Ann and I were having dinner out with a couple who, like ourselves, has small children. During the course of dinner, our conversation drifted almost inevitably to couples with young children and from there to our attitudes toward our own children. The conversation then turned to the movie, "Ordinary People" -- some of you may recall Doug's sermon about that particular movie last year. After some discussion, it became apparent that there was a radical difference between the husband and myself over the meaning of the movie.

My friend, who is a good and decent person, thought that there was a very simple moral to be drawn from the movie: The mother, whom you may recall was portrayed by Mary Tyler Moore, was presented as a selfish and somewhat unfair person. She had lost her older son, who appeared to be the favorite, in a boating accident and was unable to reach out to her surviving son, who subsequently had attempted to commit suicide. The rather simple moral of the movie from my friend's perspective was that parents ought to love their children equally, that the mother should have been grateful that she had one son who survived the accident that took the life of her other son, and gone on and loved her remaining son perhaps even more. If she had loved them equally, she should still have been able to know the joy at having one son, according to my friend.

I agreed that when I first saw the movie that I had the same kind of negative reaction to the character. But Doug's sermon on the movie had been a wonderfully transforming experience for me because I had started to see the character in a wholly different light. I tried to explain to my friend that the lesson was that we, as caring human beings and as Christians, should be much more loving to those who have suffered as that character had. I said that it seemed to me that the movie pointed out the inadequacies of the friends and the lifestyle of the character to cope with the tremendously transforming event of having lost a child.

I became somewhat frustrated and even anxious in the course of the conversation because I was unable to convey my meaning. I tried actually defending what the character had done. I argued, for

instance, that perhaps she did feel differently about her first son, and that his tragic death had made her afraid of loving the second son for fear of losing him, as well. I also told him about my mother, who has ten healthy children, but who to this day still in some sense mourns a ten-month-old son who died nearly fifty years ago. I also said that the next child in my family, also a son, has admittedly been affected by my mother's inability to cope with him after the death of that ten-month-old baby. I told him that my mother blames herself for that death even though the child died of pneumonia at a time when there was no penicillin or known cure for the disease. I told him that Doug's sermon made me understand my own mother's reaction and the reaction of others who have had to face transforming events. I tried to argue, in effect, that a transforming event like death requires more than a rational, ethical solution in order for healing to occur. It requires an equally transforming event, such as human love. I came away from the sermon with the message that I was going to try to be more caring to those people in pain, the "ordinary people," be they characters in a movie, my own mother or the stranger whose pain I cannot understand.

My good friend noted our differences. We talked about another somewhat anxiety-provoking topic. How do men as opposed to women respond to the potential death of a child? We found a very strong difference here in that he suggested that men tend to be more objective when faced with death. For example, if a child had less than a thirty percent chance of living, a husband would say, "We might as well give up," whereas the wife would reply, "Oh no. Now is the time to fight for this child's life." I told him that I disagreed with his assessment as applied to me.

Finally we talked about whether or not I felt differently about my two sons, Barry and Isaac. I readily admitted that I was more like the character portrayed by Mary Tyler Moore, that Barry, being the first son, was something very special to me and different from Isaac. I was present at Barry's birth but was unable, because of a male doctor's perception of appropriate childbirth restrictions, to see Isaac born. I argued that I did love my children differently. I further argued that different kinds of love were ethically appropriate responses to two different children because they came into our lives at different times and transformed our lives in

different ways. I then thought to myself that my friend and I saw the love of a child in a very different fashion. I was implicitly arguing that love is not a quantitative but rather a qualitative matter.

Our mutual needs to meet our babysitters' deadlines to be home stopped what was becoming a very anxious and painful experience for me. I very much wanted to communicate to my friend my meaning but left the restaurant with a sense of anxiety that carried over until the next day. Jo Ann and I talked several times on our way home and again during the next morning about the various differences between me and my friend.

With the previous night's discussion of death of children and attitudes toward children still fresh in my mind, Isaac, after church, suddenly became very ill.

II. The Children's Illnesses

Isaac's illness led unfortunately to his being hospitalized on Wednesday morning for dehydration caused by an intestinal virus. What started as a sense of unease turned into anxiety as we watched our two and one-half year-old son passively accept the intravenous needle into his little vein. Jo Ann decided to spend the first night in the hospital with Isaac, since we both were so concerned. Even though objectively we knew it was nothing serious, we were both extremely anxious. Even with all the confusion, our older son Barry, who is four and one-half, appeared to be in extremely good spirits and able to adjust to being shifted around from various friends and babysitters. But that night I was awakened by Barry's sad little voice calling; he had suddenly become ill with the same intestinal virus. I spent the night at home being awakened again and again by Barry getting sick.

The next morning I succeeded in getting a babysitter and went to the hospital to meet Jo Ann. She had been up all night because Isaac had been unable to sleep, and she was completely wrung out. We spent some minutes crying in each other's arms but finally mapped out a strategy for the second day that would involve sending her home to be with Barry and my spending the day and the next night at the hospital with Isaac.

By Friday morning, Isaac was back home after a mere 48 hours in the hospital, and by the following Tuesday morning I found myself helping to lead a discussion with the men's breakfast group of the previously scheduled topic of "Peace of Mind." It was after that discussion that I was asked to share my ideas with you today on Peace of Mind.

III. Peace of Mind

It was easy to think of peace of mind in simple terms: in my especially anxious moments this meant the children not being sick. On that particular Tuesday morning of the men's breakfast, the children were happy and healthy, both prepared to go back to Nursery School and enjoy themselves. But it seemed to me, when I actually reflected deeply on my own anxious experience of the previous week, that peace of mind must encompass a lot more.

What I came up with was at first a negative definition. Peace of mind does not mean a total absence of anxiety or stress. If you will recall, I was somewhat anxious about my relationship to my children even prior to Isaac's actual illness because of the conversation the night before with my friends. In arriving at a more positive definition of what it means to achieve peace of mind from a religious perspective, I had to encompass the normal anxiety and stress that we all must face as humans. For me, a sense of peace of mind means the courage to be, or the courage to stand alone (in Tillich's word) and the courage to be a part of something outside of oneself, the courage to lose oneself in another's and in God's being. It seemed to me that Tillich's notion of "courage" denotes a sense of overcoming that anxiety that comes with the ultimate aloneness, which is death, and the ultimate togetherness, the deepest of human love.

In addition, I had an opportunity to reflect on the things that had kept me from achieving a sense of peace of mind during that period of crisis. I suggested to our men's group that many of us, but particularly men, have difficulty achieving peace of mind because of two overwhelmingly large issues: control and perfection. Most successful people that I know - lawyers, academics are accustomed to having control, of being autonomous in their

professional lives. Because we tend to concentrate on being in control, I believe we have a great deal of difficulty being at ease with that which is not in our control, of that which is unknown. The illness of a loved one, particularly the illness of a small child who cannot articulate clearly what is troubling him, points out to us how little control we have over that which is most important to us. I confess to feeling particularly helpless when little Isaac suddenly deteriorated to the point that he was listless and there was nothing that I could do but turn to others, in this case the medical professionals, for help.

Second, most people that I know who consider themselves Christians, particularly those men, believe that they are perfect. This means that we have difficulty accepting our own and others' failure to live up to a Christ-like ideal in all aspects of our lives -- personal, work, and community. When something unfortunate befalls us, we often castigate ourselves. I can remember saying to myself that perhaps Isaac caught the virus because he was chilled while ice skating with me the previous Saturday. In other words, it was my fault. Although in one sense these were castigating thoughts, in another sense they were thoughts of arrogance: I was suggesting that I had ultimate control over whether or not my child would contract a virus. After all, Jo Ann and I work hard to make sure both of our children are fed nutritious food, get plenty of rest and exercise -- all the things that should lead to "perfectly" healthy children. What we must learn to accept in order to have peace of mind is our own imperfection, which is related to our own inability to control the world.

While Isaac was hospitalized I had to ask many of my friends for help. Most were extremely helpful and gracious, but the reaction of one of my neighbors to one of my requests brought home to me how much we are threatened by illness -- an imperfection that always poses the threat of death, the symbol of our ultimate lack of control. After I had spent the whole day at the hospital with Isaac, I came home briefly to see Barry. I had given Jo Ann all of my cash the previous day so that she could get something to eat at the hospital. I called a neighbor whom I know quite well and asked him if he had any cash. I wanted to give him a check, and I explained the whole situation. Instead of responding to my plea for help, he gave me what was in effect a lecture on how I might cash a

check at the storebank, etc. He probably thought he was being helpful by giving me guidance on how rationally to solve my problem of a lack of cash, but I realized he was actually threatened by the whole situation. I mumbled something like "thanks" and went back to the hospital without any cash, hoping that I would remember to ask Jo Ann for some of her cash.

IV. Achieving Peace of Mind

The first important lesson that I learned from this experience is the appropriate purpose for prayer. During that week, I at first thought that I should pray for Isaac's health, particularly when he was hospitalized. But somehow that did not seem to soothe me, because the prayer was simply a request to God to restore me as an autonomous individual who was "in control of a threatening situation." In other words, I wanted my life made perfect and orderly. But the true role of prayer in helping to restore peace of mind is, in my opinion, as a plea to be able to accept the unknown in the stressful or painful situation, a plea to meet the dynamics of the situation, a plea to allow our being to be touched and transformed by whatever we must face.

At times I felt the whole thing was unfair -- to Isaac, Barry, Jo Ann, and me. And I felt angry at times. Those negative feelings were part of the search for peace of mind. They were also an important stage in overcoming the threat to my equilibrium and finding out what to pray for. During that night, as I was awakened and reawakened by Barry, it occurred to me that I needed to pray for the strength to face the unknown; I needed to pray for the strength to face whatever I needed to face. That was the right prayer.

In other words, we must look to Christ's prayer in Gethsemane as an instruction to us that we must allow ourselves to be in touch with our own feelings, be they anger, despair, or fear. But our faith in God allows us to know that we can recognize that we are not totally in control.

Our Biblical tradition helps to point to a second important lesson for achieving peace of mind: We must love in the face of threats not only to ourselves but to those we hold most dear. Think

back to the story of Abraham and Isaac. That particular story is usually described as God's testing of Abraham. In other words, God is trying to determine how much faith Abraham has. In one view of the story, we can say that Abraham passed the test; in fact he got an "A."

But the Christian message about faith is very different, for, as St. Paul says, we are justified by our faith. Let me offer you another view of the meaning of the story of Abraham and Isaac. This is the story of a man capable of loving his son when he, Abraham, believes his son's life is threatened, when he thinks his son is about to suffer for some unknown reason. Despite the threat from the unknown source or force, the father continues to love his son. The father is there at the time of suffering; when the son calls, the father says, "Here I am."

So viewed, Abraham's reward is not an "A" for his faith, but rather a promise of immortality for his love in the face of the threat of human suffering -- the threat of death. God told him that "... I will multiply your descendants ... and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves ..."

Fortunately we are not often called to face a certain and known death in our daily lives, but we are called upon to face up to human suffering in those around us -- be they the person with a life threatening illness, the parent who has lost a child, or a person who is simply lonely. The important message for Christians is that of St. Paul: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed. In other words the threat to my son's life changed me. It has changed Jo Ann and Barry also. Isaac's suffering has become a transforming event in my own life.

V. Conclusion

A day after Isaac returned home from the hospital, our friends with whom we had had dinner a week before suffered a tragedy in their own lives. Their one year-old son had a high fever that led to his hospitalization because of convulsions. He, like Isaac, recovered, although the diagnosis was more serious than that of the severe virus our Isaac had had. A few days after their son was

released from the hospital, they invited our family over to their house for brunch.

We wondered why they wanted to entertain so soon after such a difficult period of time in their lives; we surmised that they simply wanted to be with people who knew something of what they had been through. You might have thought that the brunch conversation would have been an exchange of war stories about our experiences at the hospital. It was not. As I mentioned before, our lives had been changed by the threat to Isaac's health. We offered no lessons, no rebukes for the anxiety caused by our previous conversations. We did not talk much about the conversation we had the night before Isaac became ill. As a matter of fact, we did not talk very much about our son's illness. We simply offered them our friendship and love at a time when they felt some isolation and anxiety in their lives. By so loving -- without knowing all that they felt or thought, without having any agreement about important topics such as attitudes about children -- we achieved a sense of peace of mind, that ability to face the unknown and the threat to our equilibrium. In other words, to love where there is imperfection and where we are not in control, is to have a sense of peace of mind.

Amen.