

Inscribed
February 27, 2011
Rev. Tadd Allman-Morton
Westhampton Congregational United Church of Church

At a glance you wouldn't notice it. You couldn't see it, because most days he looks like any professional—wearing a button shirt, slacks, some sort of tie, and dress shoes. The tie might get loosened toward the end of the day, because he does work a lot of long days. But, you wouldn't be able to guess that anything was unusual about my friend Chris. That's just how he dresses for work—neat, professional and buttoned up.

Now sometimes he looks *very* different. On Sundays he wears some jewelry—like big crosses, along with stoles or robes while he helps lead worship. But that's to be expected of ministers. It is part of the gig. On those days, too, Chris looks professional. But if you came across Chris on one of his days off, you might just be surprised. He might not be so buttoned up then. He would probably be wearing a short sleeved shirt, and *then* you would notice it; or at least some of it. Because Chris has tattoos; in fact, Chris has more tattoos than anyone I have ever met.

He is largely covered from neck to chest, with even more on his legs. I am not joking when I say that if he hadn't become a minister, he could have been a tattooed man in a circus. He has all sorts of tattoos: fanciful designs like spider webs and stars; some obscure phrases; beautiful pictures of animals. He has tattoos that are still being worked on and ones that have been with him for years and years. He is a sight to see! Even though I would probably faint if I went to get a tattoo, I really do admire the art, and the sheer level of patience that Chris must have to undergo that much needle work. You really have to want all those designs on you to get them inked into place like that.

But for all the dazzling tattoos that Chris has, my two favorites are very simple. They are two words that everyone knows: "Mom," and "Dad." I like them best because those two little words evoke big relationships of caring. They really demonstrates just how much he loves his parents, which tells us something about how much they love him. There is also something poetic about it. Chris is the fruit of their married flesh, and he owns that by emblazoning their names right on his own flesh.

Now, I imagine that Chris has had his moments with his parents. I would bet that not every second of their lives together has been perfect. Every parent and child relationship has its ups and downs. That's just how they go. And I would bet that no one has ever made it through growing up without feeling at least occasionally like their parents have forgotten them, or just don't care about them.

The Jews were in exile in Babylon. They had been removed from everything they knew and held to be dear and Holy. And it was a long way back home. Their homeland was desolate; completely sacked. The terrain on the journey home was harsh, too. It must have been tempting to stay put. They must have felt like they were in prison, with no chance for release. But God said something else to them. God said: ““In a time of favor I *have* answered you, on a day of salvation I *have* helped you; I *have kept* you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; saying to the prisoners, “*Come out,*” to those who are in darkness, “*Show yourselves.*””¹

There are many places that can feel like prisons. There are many moments when we feel cut off from God’s presence. And it can affect us at every level of our lives. Sometimes, it may be as simple as the daily parade of woe that calls itself news. There is nothing new about it really; you can almost always depend on the news to spin the day’s events toward worry and fear. My colleagues Rev. Cat Munz and Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian talked about watching the news at our Pastor’s Bible Study this week. They said that it used to be that you could turn to a weather channel to get a break from the relentless bad news on the news stations. You could have a break, watch the clouds and catch your breath. But things have changed—now, *even the weather stations* have loud voices booming about TRACKING STORMS and WEATHER EMERGENCIES, complete with scenes of lightning and record setting snow storms.

Our culture relentlessly offers us all sorts of new products as though they are things we simply *must* have: the latest computer, or car, or something other plastic gadget. Have you seen that ad that allows you to trade up your cell phone when the next technological advance comes along? Is there really a reason that we can’t wait a month or even a year to get the latest phone?! Do we really need it *as soon as it is available*? And while I am at it: can anyone tell me why we really need to be able to surf the web, send e-mail, network socially, listen to and download music, and get countless applications for everything from thermometers to random sound-effects *in our phones*?! How does any of that get us to be closer to God? To me, keeping up with all that unnecessary *stuff* just busies up my life and distracts me from God’s presence.

(Please note that at this point in the live delivery of the sermon, a member of the Men’s Choir was heard to remark: “There’s an app for that...” This led to an excurses about a recently released cell phone application for planning confessions for our sisters and brothers in the Catholic faith. This, in turn, led to another person commenting on a similar app for prayer. What great times we live in, huh!?)

There are bigger reasons, too. Tragedies in life are many. Everyone knows someone who suffers, and does so as well sometimes. Our weekly prayer list bears ample witness to this.

¹ Isaiah 49:8-9d.

There are times when I ponder the burdens I know of among the members of this congregation, and I wonder how folks are able to manage it all. I sometimes wonder how we are not constantly crying out “The Lord has *forsaken me*, my Lord *has forgotten me*,”² right along with Zion. Our own pains and worries can make us feel especially cut off from God’s presence.

Yet, God has a response to Zion’s woeful cry. And it is not “you’re right,” and it is not “listen to the nightly news, they really know what they are saying,” and it is not “who *are you* again?” It is a response of recognition, and deep and abiding intimacy. And it is set in the context of motherhood. Isaiah relates God saying: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?”³ That is how God feels about Zion, and by extension, about humanity: like a mother who has nursed us, cared for us, and even carried us in her womb. We are *that* close to God, and *even closer*. God acknowledges that certain human mothers—and by extension certain fathers, too—may indeed turn aside from a child, but that God never will turn away from humankind. . In fact, God tells us that we are inscribed on the palms of God’s hands. We are as close as the skin of God’s hands, and God’s hands are poetically understood to have wrought *everything* in creation, but somehow *especially* us.

The psalmist tells us that we were knit in the wombs of our human mothers by God.⁴ The prophet Jeremiah reminds us that we are able to be reformed by God’s grace just like we are clay in the hands of a master potter.⁵ Even the ancient Hebrew word for human beings—*adahm*; or earth, or clay—evokes images of God forming us into being with Holy hands.⁶ Not only were we made by those hands, but our names are even written upon them. Not only written on them, but inscribed into them—a permanent part of God.

We are the result of God’s handiwork, and God owns that by inscribing our names right on God’s hands, so that they will never escape notice. We are always in God’s heart and always before God’s eyes, no matter how isolated we may feel from time to time.

Now, we all have our moments with God. I know that not every second of our lives have been perfect. Every parent and child relationship has its ups and downs. That’s just how it goes. And we will all have moments of feeling like God has forgotten us or just doesn’t care about us. But I am glad to say that is not the case for God.

² Isaiah 49:14b-c.

³ Isaiah 49:15.

⁴ Psalm 139:13.

⁵ Jeremiah 18.

⁶ Genesis 1 & 2.

God was not going to let the Israelites just stay cloistered behind the walls of their exile. Instead, God called to them and reminded them that they would be helped on their journey home, so long as they began it. God's grace brought them home, but only once they set out on the path.

Nor is God going to let *us* be disconnected from holy grace. God is not that kind of parent. Whatever the walls may be between ourselves and God, God is calling us to pass through them. Whenever we feel imprisoned by the circumstances of our lives, God is saying "Come out!" When we feel we are in shadow, God calls us to show ourselves, and be known by God. God calls us to set foot on the path which leads us home to the one who formed us, the one who nursed us, the one upon whose hands we are forever inscribed as a reminder of just how important we are to God.

As we walk on the winding path that leads through the shadows of life may we remember this and remind one another of God's nearness—especially when God seems far away.

May God's grace guide us and may we help one another to stay on that path which brings us close to God.

Amen.

Isaiah 49:8-16a

8Thus says the Lord: In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you; I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages; 9saying to the prisoners, "Come out," to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves." They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; 10they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them. 11And I will turn all my mountains into a road, and my highways shall be raised up. 12Lo, these shall come from far away, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Syene.

13Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones. 14But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." 15Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. 16See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.