

The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain
Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church
Chattanooga, TN / Diocese of East Tennessee
Sixth Sunday of Easter / 14 May 2023

Acts 17:22-31

Psalm 66:8-20

1 Peter 3:13-22

John 14:15-21

Let me begin with a story. This is one of those stories that may well be an urban legend, a myth, a falsehood. There may not be a shred of truth to it. But it's one of those stories that, even if it's false, *should* be true. And, as the Irish say, never let the facts get in the way of a good story. However, I have looked into its background and can thus say with confidence that some version of this incident probably did, in fact, actually happen.¹

The story is about Karl Barth. He was a Swiss theologian who was undoubtedly one of the greatest intellectual figures of the 20th century. He taught in Germany until his defiance of Hitler and Nazism cost him his job. If he had been a German citizen he would have lost his life, but instead he was simply deported and then he spent the rest of his career at the University of Basle back in Switzerland. A man of immense intelligence, imagination, creativity, and knowledge, he literally transformed the landscape of theology for several generations of students and pastors and scholars. Although he died in 1968, his influence today is perhaps greater than ever before.

So here's the story. You may already know it. In 1962, Barth visited the United States and gave a lecture at in the Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago. And after his lecture a student asked Barth if he could summarize his theology in a single sentence. Now, of course, this was a remarkable—and perhaps impertinent—question to ask a man who had written literally thousands of pages of some of the most sophisticated theology ever put on paper. So you can imagine the anticipation of the audience as Professor Barth thought about his answer to the question. Could he summarize his theology in a single sentence? And you can also imagine their amazement when he replied: “Yes, I can. In the words of a song I

¹ See <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/01/did-karl-barth-really-say-jesus-loves-me-this-i-know/>

learned at my mother's knee: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me.

Yes, Jesus loves me.

Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so.

The song most of us learned when we were children contains the core of Christian doctrine as understood by the most brilliant theologian in living memory.

Now, I'm no Karl Barth, but I do teach theology. And so this story reminds me that the most profound truths are not necessarily the most difficult to understand. Something can be profound and easy at the same time. The deepest, most important things in life are often the simplest as well. Some of you may have read or heard "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." My mother and step-father gave me a framed copy when I received my second master's degree, so they were clearly trying to tell me something. This short essay by Robert Fulghum begins: "All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School."

If Karl Barth was right, then this is also true when it comes to theology. What a preschool class learns in Sunday School contains the most important, most profound, most illuminating truth there is: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Everything after that is secondary. So for our little ones down in Children's Chapel, for those who have just graduated from seminary, as well as for those who have been at this life-thing for a long time, this is an important lesson to remember.

This story also resonates with me because, in addition to being the Sixth Sunday of Easter, today is also of course Mother's Day. Mother's Day is one of those public holidays that we don't quite know what to do with in Church. After all, we come to church to worship God, not to worship our mothers. Mother's Day is not included among the feasts of the Church. Some people have difficult and painful relations with their mothers, and some either never knew their biological mothers or have lost them in death. But others have

deep, close, happy relationships with their mothers. So Mother's Day can be wonderful and joyous, or sappy and sentimental, or dark and difficult.

But what I want to focus on now is the role of mothers in the nurturing of faith. As Karl Barth said, he learned his most important and profound theological lessons at his mother's knee. And for many people, it is indeed from their mother that they first learn the basic elements of their religious tradition: for Christians, the Lord's Prayer and simple songs such as "Jesus Loves Me." Again, it is not at the top of the graduate-school mountain that we often learn the essential truths of the Christian faith, but from our mothers in infancy.

It is thus interesting that Jesus uses a poignant parental image in today's Gospel lesson. He says, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." Jesus is here saying that no matter what the situation may be with our natural parents, we will never be orphans, precisely because of his love. Indeed, he says: "those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

So on this Sixth Sunday of Easter that is also Mother's Day, we give thanks for theologians like Karl Barth, and theologians like our mothers, and pray that we may truly learn that

Jesus loves us, this we know, for the Bible tells us so.
Little ones to him belong, we are weak, but he is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves us.
Yes, Jesus loves us.
Yes, Jesus loves us, the Bible tells us so.