

'The Scalpel Brings Pain, but Gives Life' Based on Romans 6:1-11, and Matthew 10:24-39
Delivered on Sunday, June 21, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

Since it is Father's Day, I thought I'd share another story about my father. This one is about his battle with esophageal cancer. Way back in the late 1990s, my father started to struggle with swallowing. I remember after a dinner at one of his favorite restaurants, El Rancho, Pop showed my brother and I a lump coming out of his chest, and how it moved when he swallowed.

In that moment, my strong and brave father, well, he seemed scared. Within a few weeks, he had a diagnosis of cancer and a treatment plan was mapped out. He would go down to Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital in Manhattan, first for chemotherapy and radiation, and then, if those were successful, surgery. He was admitted into a trial for a new chemo treatment, and it took its toll on him – he lost more than 70 pounds. Yes, the tumor had shrunk, but he had become so weak, that there were times we thought he would die then. We were afraid the chemo meant to save him, was actually going to kill him.

But then we got good news that the chemo and radiation appeared to have done their job, and Pop was scheduled for surgery, to remove most of his esophagus. The hope was that by cutting out the remaining tissue where the cancer had been, the cancer which had not yet spread and was now fully at bay, would with surgery, never return, allowing my father to live a normal life cancer free.

One of my favorite stories in the lead up to his surgery was an endoscopy, where they put a small camera down his throat to look at his esophagus and stomach. For this, it was critical that the scope go down his esophagus, not his windpipe. So, the nurse told him it might be uncomfortable getting to the stomach, but if it went down his windpipe, he should tell her immediately, because, 'That,' she said, 'will be the worst pain you've had in your life.' And so, they pushed the scope down, and went to the monitor to look inside.

To their horror, the scope was in his lungs. The doctors and nurses rushed to address my father and pull the scope gently out of his lungs. Afterward, the nurse asked my father why he didn't say anything about the pain, to which he responded, "You said the worst pain I've ever had: I've had worse."

This is an example of my father's toughness and tolerance for pain, but also his commitment and bravery in the face of fear. You see, he knew the chemo and radiation would make him weak, he knew the endoscopy and other procedures would hurt, and that the surgery would be painful also, even that it would change his life forever. But despite his fear, this was his hope, he knew this was his chance to live, and that he did also for seven more years, when without all of this, the doctors said he might live only maybe one or two years more.

When facing a diagnosis of cancer, my father put his faith in the medical team treating him. He did as they asked, complied with every treatment, no matter how painful, and persevered, even as what he went through completely changed his life drastically. But the end result, was that despite the effects of these treatments, in his weakened state, not being able to sleep laying flat any more, his hope comforted him, over against his fear, and he gained five to seven more years of life, with lots of rounds of golf, that he was able to truly enjoy.

This is the hope we have when facing a major medical crisis: that the cure will restore us. We want to be prepared by our doctors and nursing staff that care for us, to know what to expect and count the cost, with the hope that it will work. Like my father, when we face a crisis, we are afraid, especially of change. We know that some things will hurt us on the road to recovery, and sadly, we even know that some treatments fail us, and the disease or injury will ultimately take our life.

And no matter what our faith in God may be, we also find ourselves having to put hope and faith in the medical team, and the treatments meant to heal us. This is a normal thing to do.

In today's gospel reading, we find a series of statements Jesus makes to His disciples, and they all relate to the idea of what they can expect to encounter as His followers. He tells them and us we will face trials and persecutions but comforts us with hope.

First, He addresses the religious communities that profess to worship the One True God, speaking largely then of the Pharisees but speaking to what still exists in the Church today. Then he moved to the political authorities and those who may endorse violent persecutions, and ultimately, says there will even be opposition within a follower's own family. In every sphere of our life – religious, political and personal – the ways of the world will interfere with being a disciple, but Jesus calls on them, and us now, to be active but unafraid, to not let the ways of the world corrupt our faith, even as we minister to the world itself.

Jesus says that disciples cannot expect to escape trials and pain but that they should expect it. He says that if they will call Him – who is their teacher and master – by the name Beelzebul, something that happens later in Matthew after Jesus casts out a demon, then followers of Christ can expect that they will be called the same, even when among people professing to worship the God of Israel.

Jesus explains that false teachers will have their deeds exposed before God, for nothing that is secret will not become known. He calls on His followers to be open, so, we should take the good news of Jesus that we believe inside of us, and proclaim boldly God's love for the world, by our words and our actions, regardless of what the world does to us in response. Indeed, those authorities that can kill the body – like the Roman state which will kill Jesus – they cannot kill the soul. This means our concern is not supposed to be what is good for the empire, but to do God's will in loving the people in the world, in the empire. Ultimately, if we are to fear anyone, it is God.

Yet, God values even the sparrows, the cheapest animal to sacrifice, and values every human life so much more. Indeed, God's value for humanity can be seen in what God sacrifices for us: It's not mere birds. No, our value is seen in the fact that God entered into our humanity to be one of us, to live as we live in Jesus the Messiah, to die for us, and to rise again for our salvation. God chose to share God's life – abundant and eternal – through the sacrifice of the cross and the resurrection.

You see, at the creation of humanity, we were given two major gifts, a share in God's sovereignty, namely what we call free will, and the capacity for love, both to receive it and to give it. But these gifts were and are squandered by sin, when we choose our own will over God's, and direct our love inwardly, at ourselves or even false gods, after which we desire, wealth, power, popularity and things of that nature.

The good news is that God has, from the beginning, had a rescue plan in place for us, because God's sovereignty is greater than our free will. That sovereignty has a plan centered on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to conquer sin and death. Indeed, by this good news, God pursues us with forgiveness in the grace and love of Jesus, but this is not a license to go about in the world sinning or ignoring cries for justice. Apathy is not a Christian virtue. No, our sins of commission – those offenses of our own action – and our sins of omission – those injustices we turn a blind eye to – do not reflect a faith that recognizes that our baptism, which was a baptism into the death of Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, who died and was raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit, so that we might live by the same Holy Spirit, living within and acting through us.

We must allow for our old self – the self that is committed to our own interests – to be crucified on that cross with Christ so that we will walk in new life. You see, the Christian life is not a location, but a walk, and Christ is not a mere destination, but literally, the way, truth and life. That word we translate 'way' is the Greek word for 'road.' We must continually die to ourselves and live in Christ, walking on the road with Him. This is what Jesus means when he says that we must take up our cross to come follow Him.

The goal of our faith is not to be baptized as a baby and settle for having been found, nor is it to say the Sinner's Prayer and assume that we have found Jesus. The Christian faith is to be found by God, to always seek Christ, and to walk in the Spirit. To accomplish this, we must cut out the ways of this world, and make the way, the truth and the life of Jesus our priority. Indeed, the way is to love God and love neighbor, the truth is the good news of God's reign, and the life is to share in that reign, both now and eternally, to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

If you or I somehow convince ourselves that the Christian life is meant to be easy for us, or that the proof of our doing it right is in our freedom from persecution or trouble, then we ignore the words of Jesus here and risk considering ourselves better than Him – the One whom this world hanged on a tree to die. This is what Jesus meant when He said He came to bring a sword, because like the scalpel or the laser that cuts away cancer, removing the influence of the world from us is not easy, and the world's ways will inflict pain to keep us, but like my father's treatments and surgery, ultimately, we will find life.

The world teaches us to value power, winning, popularity, lust, wealth and comfort above all, and sadly, these worldly values are what drive our political and economic systems, and sadder still, the world's teachings have even found their way into the church. We are afraid to imagine a world where we sacrifice our power for others. It is scary to think of proclaiming the gospel, and being left alone. We are all right to be frightened by having to face poverty. But what about those God calls us to empower? What about those already pushed to the margins? What about those already in poverty needing help?

Jesus calls us to follow Him, who humbled Himself to share in our humanity, and like Him, he calls us to take up our cross – this is not a saying to merely endure life's inconveniences – but to lift up the burdens of this world and its injustice, laying down our life, our identity, in order to gain our life, and our complete identity in Him. Or as Paul puts it, because Christ has been crucified and raised from the dead, death has no dominion over Him, and if we die to ourselves, share in His death, we can trust in His promise that we will share in His resurrection as well.

This does not mean we keep sinning, but continually die to our sins. Yet, like cancer in our bodies, the world's ways are invasive and spread easily. We must resist these worldly ways for God's ways, but we have fears and doubts. We want to do everything in our power to protect ourselves from pain. Who would actually want to be ridiculed for their faith in Jesus? Not me. Who would actually want to face persecution even death? Not me. Who would want to be pushed out, ostracized? Not me. This is all frightening to us, but Jesus says it will happen.

Chemotherapy, radiation and surgery hurt us, but they extend our life. In the same way, the sword of Christ is painful as we cut out the ways of this world, but we gain far more than just a couple more years – we gain an eternity. Indeed, there will be struggles, but we do not have to be paralyzed by fear, because God is greater than all that the world can dish out. Rather than worrying about what we might miss out on, imagine what the world would be like, if every professed Christian, submitted to God's will. What if we all lived out Jesus's teachings, without diluting them, to truly love God with all we have and our neighbors as ourselves, regarding others, in their struggles, as more important than our own selves and our own struggles.

I believe the church would again become an attractive force, pushing compassion for the sick in this pandemic, rather than arguing over whether to wear a mask, and joining in the work to root out racism, rather than turning a blind eye to say it doesn't exist. The church must be involved, and it must seek God's will in this world. Again, my friends, to follow Christ and die to sin in ourselves first is not easy, but we must do it each individually and together corporately.

Start small by making a personal choice to show God's love, even if you are mocked. I saw with horror someone in a supposedly theological debate on Facebook telling another Christian he disagreed with, that he should take his own life. That is not Christianity. Regardless of the debate, we know who was not sharing God's love. When we see people calling each other 'idiots' and other pejorative names and insults, this cannot reflect Christ, who said that to do this made you just as guilty as a murderer.

We can start to live by our faith by stopping any behavior like that, which reflects poorly on God and on ourselves, and not assume that we are not guilty of the same in what we share and what we say in social media and to each other. If someone says we are just being weak when we do that, we can say in response, "My God was not weak when He went to the cross and died for me." That was not weakness. That was love. What we must seek is love and God's justice.

From the little things, let us build from there, and endure, because if we believe the good news, then we know: God – the Father, Son & Holy Spirit – is greater than all, and is with us, and will remain with us to carry us, who are flawed and broken people, through to make this world a better place now and to live eternally with Him in the new creation. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

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words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom

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(Matthew 10:24-39 NRSV) "A **disciple** is not above the teacher, **nor** a slave **above** the master; **it** is **enough** for the disciple to be **like** the **teacher**, and the **slave** like the master. If **they** have **called** the **master** of the house **Beelzebul**, **how much** more will they **malign** those of his household! "So have no fear of **them**; for nothing is covered up **that will** not be **uncovered**, and **nothing secret** that will not **become known**. What I **say** to you in the **dark**, **tell** in the **light**; and **what** you **hear whispered**, **proclaim** from the **housetops**. Do not **fear** those who **kill** the **body** but **cannot** kill the soul; **rather** fear **him** who can **destroy both soul** and body in **hell**. Are not **two** sparrows sold for a **penny**? **Yet** not one of them will **fall** to the **ground apart from** your **Father**. And **even** the **hairs of your head** are all **counted**. So do not be **afraid**; you **are** of more **value** than **many sparrows**. "**Everyone therefore** who **acknowledges** me before others, I **also** will acknowledge **before** my Father in heaven; **but** whoever **denies** me before **others**, I also will **deny** before my Father in **heaven**. "Do not **think** that I have come to bring **peace** to the **earth**; I have not come to **bring** peace, but a **sword**. For I **have** come to set a man **against** his father, and a **daughter** against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's **foes** will be **members** of one's own **household**. Whoever **loves** father or **mother** more than me is not **worthy** of me; and **whoever** loves **son** or daughter **more than** me is not worthy of me; and whoever **does** not **take up** the **cross** and **follow** me is not worthy **of** me. **Those** who find **their** life will **lose** it, **and** those who lose their **life** for **my sake** will **find** it.