

THE SECRET STRENGTH OF ENDURANCE

(05/10/2020)

Scripture Lessons: Romans 5:1-5
Luke 21:19

“By your endurance you will gain your souls.” (Luke 21:19)

Today is the fourth Sunday after Easter (the fifth Sunday of the Easter season). It is also the ninth Sunday that, because of the restrictions on public gatherings during the coronavirus pandemic, we have not been able to meet as the gathered church for Sunday morning worship.

I think we are positioned well for the time when restrictions on public gatherings are lifted. I can imagine a time when our governor will stipulate that the citizens of Massachusetts are not to meet in groups of more than one hundred. No problem for us! Even if he cut it down to fifty, this would not present us with a challenge. If he decided that twenty-five were the maximum allowed, we might have to actually count people as they entered the sanctuary and draw lots to see who had to listen to the service over the loudspeaker downstairs in the vestry. Most Sundays, in a sanctuary that seats one hundred people, we could probably seat one person to a pew and have room left over for visitors. There are definite advantages to our being a small church!

Actually, now that I think of it, with the coffee already brewed downstairs and the not-so-humble repast spread out for the coffee hour, I can imagine several of our parishioners quickly and graciously offering to give up their place in the sanctuary to someone else. Let it not be said that the members of this church don't know what it means to be a Christian!

On communion Sundays, if you recall, there are generally two inserts in your bulletin. One is our Active/Acute Prayer List, which is comprised of members or friends of our church family who are suffering from an illness or are in some kind of acute distress. Bob L'Heureux updates this list regularly (when people take the initiative to keep him informed of changes in a person's status). The other, which is updated less often, is our Sustaining/Continued Prayer List. We don't publish these lists on our web site to protect these people's privacy and confidentiality.

During our moments of prayer when we meet in worship, we review the names on our Acute Concerns Prayer List. We may ask that someone we know to be in special need be added to the list or we may have an update on someone's condition. We seldom take the time to read

the names of those on our sustaining prayer list, those who are struggling with long term or chronic conditions.

Today I want us to think about these people and hold them in our prayers. We have lost four of these people over the past month, at least two, maybe three where the coronavirus was at least a contributing factor. I also want us to think about the many people like them, people whose names could very well appear on this list. I don't know what the cut-off point is to move someone from acute to continued care, but I suspect that more people may qualify for our continuing care list than we realize. I also have the feeling that some of you who are reading this sermon are struggling with a chronic condition or a situation that you just carry, that you don't generally talk about or complain about, but which would qualify you for this list.

The afflictions with which people on our sustaining list are struggling are many and varied. Many are in nursing homes, assisted living, or memory care units. Two people on a recent list have advanced MS and one has severe chronic pain. One person has struggled with schizophrenia since youth. A family is recovering from the suicide of a family member. Several on the list are struggling with dementia or Alzheimer's disease. One has had a stroke while another is slowly recovering from a severe brain hemorrhage.

My lower back tightens up during my early morning walk with our dog (I think I may have sciatica), and the arthritis in my hips occasionally interferes with my sleep, but for some reason, I don't feel like sharing this information with you right now.

The people on this list have been living with a debilitating condition for some time. The sad part is that they probably always will. They may not get better. It takes a certain kind of strength to beat an illness. It takes another, perhaps a deeper kind of strength to simply endure.

It also takes a special kind of strength for caregivers to endure: to remain engaged, to just keep giving day after day, year after year when a loved one in their care is struggling with a chronic condition, a condition that is slowly and insidiously becoming worse. Here I think of the families of the four parishioners whom we lost this past month, and I hold them in my prayers. I also think of people in the front lines of the pandemic response, nurses like Dianne Simmons of our church.

I first became aware of the ordeal of dealing with a chronic condition and the challenge it presents to caregivers during the summer that I spent in the clinical pastoral education program at

Tewksbury State Hospital following my first year in theological school. I thought that, armed with a plethora of psychological theories and a range of possible clever psychotherapeutic and spiritually based interventions, we would be able to “get these people better” and send them happily home. I was young and idealistic back then.

This isn't what happened. Instead of feeling the gratification of functioning as a gifted healer, I was humbled. However, I learned a very important lesson. I learned what it meant for a person to struggle with a chronic mental illness. I learned how important it was for patients who would probably never live independently, to receive sensitive, empathic, compassionate, patient, accepting, and loving care from nurses, doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, attendants, and chaplains. This was an important lesson.

Around the same time, in one of my psychology courses at Andover Newton Theological School, I read a book on basic types of pastoral counseling by Seward Hiltner, one of the giants in the pastoral counseling movement. Hiltner outlined the basics of insight-oriented counseling, depth or analytic psychotherapy, marital and family therapy, and different types of group experiences that pastors could offer to parishioners. He also advised us to refer parishioners to outside resources for specialized interventions when the situation was beyond our abilities.

Then Hiltner mentioned a final type of pastoral care or counseling, a type he called “sustained” or “sustaining.” He told those of us entering the ministry that we are going to have some parishioners who are not only doing the best they can, they are already doing the best they will ever do. He told us that our ministry to them might not “get them better” or help them measurably improve their life situation, but we might be able to “keep them afloat,” to help them maintain the quality of life that is possible for them. He said that this is a valid and very important pastoral ministry.

Throughout my fifty years of ordained ministry, which has taken place in parishes, state mental hospitals, schools where I have taught, pastoral counseling centers, and in my private practice as a psychotherapist, I have come to realize the profound truth of this insight.

During a recent shelter-in-place search through Netflix, Darlene and I decided to re-watch one of the early episodes of a popular crime scene series that we have followed for several years. In this episode, an infant's death from being left unattended in a locked car on a hot summer day,

which at first appears to be a tragic accident or at the most a case of gross negligence, turns out to be a murder.

The investigators discover that the infant's parents had previously lost a child to Tay-Sachs disease. Since both parents were carriers of this gene, there was a 25% chance that their second child would be infected. When the second child begins to manifest symptoms of what looks like Tay-Sachs, the parents assume he is beginning the painful journey toward death. They decide that they simply cannot go through this painful process again, so they leave him in a hot car to die, pretending to be shocked and remorseful when he is discovered.

When confronted, the mother says, "You don't know what it is like to lose a child. We couldn't go through it again." It was true; none of the investigators had lost a child. But is the emotional pain of caring for a dying child so great that it justifies taking the last year or two of that child's life? By the way, and this is the kicker--the child did not have Tay-Sachs!

I wanted to say what I'm sure the investigators thought: "Suck it up and deal with it." There are people in this church who have lost children. There are people in this church whose children struggle with serious medical conditions, emotional problems, or with the consequences of ill-advised life decisions. I'm sorry, but that's part of life. God never promised us a rose garden. When you sign on to life, marriage, and parenthood you should expect to encounter difficulties, even tragedies. Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Stop trying to run away from your difficulties. Move forward into them. Let them shape you. Then transcend them.

Over the past two months, as part of my resolution to read a book a week, I have found myself drawn to re-read several books on mountaineering, books like *Into Thin Air*, Jon Krakauer's description of the 1996 attempt to climb Mt. Everest during which world-class guides Rob Hall, Scott Fisher, and ten other climbers perished. This is a revealing account not only of how people respond to obstacles and unexpected difficulties, but how people respond to the plight of others. Some expeditions, e.g., the International team led by the Scottish climber Mel Duff and the IMAX team led by the American David Breashears, dropped everything to help the stricken climbers. Without hesitation, they made their precious oxygen available to the rescuers. Others, e.g., the South African team, wouldn't even lend the rescue party their two-way radios. I think there is a message in this to us as we (meaning not only our nation but also the world) go through this pandemic.

In addition to *Into Thin Air* I am planning to re-read *High Exposure*, Breashears' riveting description of his 1996 attempt to summit Mt. Everest. This past week, Darlene and I watched the recent movie *Meru*, about the amazing first ascent of this extremely challenging Himalayan mountain. Sometime over the next few months, as I/we struggle with a pandemic that seems to have no end in sight, I am planning to re-read Alfred Lansing's *Endurance*, the account of Ernest Shackleton's attempt in 1914-16 to travel across Antarctica. When I read accounts of people struggling to survive unbelievably hostile conditions in the pursuit of their goals, I am awed by the strength and resolve of the human spirit. Perhaps this is what we need at a time like this.

My obsession with the accounts of these courageous undertakings has had the unfortunate consequence of making me somewhat annoying--or perhaps a little more annoying than I already am. When neighbors whom I encounter during my early morning walk complain about the brief snow flurry that we recently experienced, I can't resist describing the conditions on the top of Mt. Everest in the midst of a storm. When they say, "I don't think I can take this lock-down any longer," I remind them that Shackleton's men were trapped on a boat and later on a deserted little island in Antarctica for eighteen months. Not without the gift of self-reflection, however, I am actually coming to see how my responses to my neighbors' complaints could be experienced as annoying. Or perhaps some people are just too sensitive!

I know that one of the difficult aspects of what we are going through, what we are all going through, is its attendant uncertainty. When will we be able to get our lives back? When will our life as individuals, as families, as a nation, and as a world return to normal? Will it ever? And what will the "new normal" look like? Will it be better or worse than what we had before this all began?

The ability to endure is an essential dimension of the human spirit. It has a profound impact on the quality of our life in times of hardship. Consider the degree of pain and suffering, the degree of hardship the people on the Antarctic expedition were able to endure. If Shackleton and his men wouldn't quit, why should we? If Shackleton and his men--frozen, soaking wet, hungry, and exhausted could survive eighteen months of unbelievably severe weather, perhaps we can summon the resolve to meet the challenges of our daily lives during this pandemic. Perhaps we can shelter-in-place, social distance, and wear our masks for a little while longer.

The apostle Paul tells us that suffering produces endurance. We develop the quality of endurance if we meet the trials of our lives with the right attitude, if we meet our moments of suffering head on. Paul tells us that endurance produces character. C. G. Jung was fond of the following quote of Jesus: “It is through endurance that you will gain your soul.”

Some problems in our lives are solvable. Actually, more of the problems of our lives are solvable than we realize. When you can solve a problem, for heaven’s sake, solve it!

Some problems in our lives are avoidable. Many of our problems fall into this category. The parents in the television episode sought to avoid the problem of caring for a dying child. Avoiding usually isn’t a good idea, partially because it seldom works. This is beautifully illustrated in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Masque of the Red Death*. It is better to deal with our problems, to try to resolve them or at least develop a healthy and positive attitude toward them.

A third category of problems cannot be avoided and cannot be resolved. A terminal illness falls into this category. The omnipresent string of viruses probably falls into this category. Death falls into this category, whether it is premature by our reckoning or not. There is no way to run from it and there is no way to make it disappear. These are the situations that call for endurance, that call forth endurance from within us. If we can endure, we will grow through the struggle. When the tragedy becomes our teacher, we discover the inner resources we need to carry the suffering that is attendant to the situation with dignity and grace.

Years ago, while I was working in state mental hospitals, I learned a lot about endurance. I learned it from people who struggle with chronic mental illness, who do not despair but try to make the best of every day. When I saw patients share their last cigarette with a fellow patient, I realized that the emotional pain they were experiencing could not break them, could not prevent them from reaching out to others. Most of them were never going to “get better.” They were simply enduring, but there was something humbling and moving about their capacity to endure.

A nurse in one of these hospitals came down with terminal cancer. We often talked of her death. She was seriously considering committing suicide as she approached the end. As she put it, she had a low tolerance for pain and a more than marginal propensity to complain. She had witnessed a neighbor who, in the process of dying from cancer, became such a miserable human being that her children hated her by the time she died. The nurse didn’t want to go out

like this. She asked me if I would help her commit suicide if and when she got to the point where she couldn't take it any longer.

As she neared the end, she found an inner strength of spirit that surprised her. Instead of trying to run from her pain, she moved toward it. She became even more beautiful the last six months of her life. Her suffering called forth the quality of endurance. Out of this endurance, she carried not only her physical pain with grace and dignity, but also the emotional distress of leaving her children too early.

We are capable of rising to the occasion just as the mountaineers did on those expeditions, just as the nurse did in her struggle with cancer. We can do more than survive; we can transcend our struggle. We are capable of enduring what Shackleton's men endured. They never lost hope. They never gave up. Because of this, *not a single one of them was lost*.

What situations or problems in our lives are we desperately trying to avoid? What situations or problems in our lives do we need to solve, to resolve? And what situations or problems in our lives do we need to accept and endure? What resources do we bring to those situations that call for or call forth endurance from deep within us?

If, like the apostle Paul, our lives are grounded in faith, we will not only endure, we will transcend. The experience will shape and deepen our soul.

We should hold the people whose names appear on our sustaining or continued prayer list in our prayers, trusting that our caring and our spiritual presence through prayer can help them find the strength they need to endure. And we should turn to prayer as a resource if we discover that we or someone we love should rightfully be on that list.

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