

Sermon for the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 25, Year C

October 28, 2007 Randal B. Gardner

Last week I used a reference piece called "Maslow meets Jesus," in which our church's national stewardship officer, Terry Parsons, applies Maslow's "hierarchy of need" to the way we join and belong to a church. Her contention is that in any given week about 40% of those sitting in the church's pews are dealing with some kind of insecurity, even to the point of survival. Part of the reality is that these numbers, progressing from survival mode to feeling at home and secure are not a straight linear path. One can be in existential bliss one morning and in peril the next.

Friends, I had no desire to preach a prophetic or sooth-saying sermon. I genuinely did not know that while we met here the first flickers of wildfires were to be the onset of this week of homelessness, fear, worry and destruction.

My family and I remained safe and at home throughout this past week. But if you can permit me to be rather personal, I'd like to share a part of my own story in the hope that it may help you and your loved ones if you go through a time of peril, either because of the fires or some other personal loss and disaster.

In November of 2005 I shared the news with my boys, then 11 and 8, that we were about to move from our home in Federal Way to a new home and church in Mercer Island. My older son seemed to take the news way too hard. His appetite dropped. He started having stomach aches all the time. He began losing weight. He seemed listless and tired.

I felt terrible. I thought he was stressing so badly because of the move, and that this was all my fault. Of course I used all the denial techniques available — assuming he'd get over it; rationalizing that he would eventually have to learn how to handle stress and change. And best of all — pretending that he wasn't really doing badly after all. Every well eaten meal relieved me of my worry for days at a time.

A few months later our pediatrician suggested the possibility of Crohn's disease, and I remember that day as clearly as the day the planes flew into the twin towers. Crohn's creates wounds and ulcers in the intestinal track, and these wounds are both painful and highly susceptible to infection. I only knew two people with Crohn's Disease. One of them was a priest who had taken disability retirement at age 45 since the stress of the job was killing him. The other was a soccer dad friend who had just begun a nutrition program of strictly intravenous feeding — he decided it would be better for him never to eat again.

I immediately assumed that Chris's life would be similarly difficult and unpleasant. I felt devastated, scared, worried and heartbroken.

And I was surprised at how rapidly I moved from that place of being so brokenhearted that I was overwhelmed to a place where I was merely brokenhearted, and then to a place where I was only deeply disturbed. Some would say I've remained there to this day. But in my own life's worst ever days I was amazed to find in myself what I had

often seen in others — a kind of remarkable resilience, a kind of psychic and spiritual determination that makes us more resilient than we think we can be.

Perhaps some of the things that helped me and Cathy the most will be helpful for you, either now because of the fires or in whatever day of crisis comes to you, as it surely will.

That suggests the first and most helpful part of our coping tools — paying attention to the fact that we were not alone. There is company in suffering, and it comes in two forms. The first form is simply accepting that bad things are not sent our way for any good reason. Suffering and difficulty are part of the way of this life, and nothing in heaven or the universe sends suffering to you in particular because of who you are or what you've done. Some things just happen, and something will happen to each and every one of us. I had to let go of my worry that I had somehow caused my son's Crohn's by taking a new job.

The other part of company that was helpful was the company of those who were going through similar things. We were so helped by all the people we met who were also living with Crohns disease. We were so helped by getting the chance to help others. I'll say more about that in a bit.

However, I'll warn you that in company with others we also learned about the reality of competitive suffering. People would ask us about our son, and then say something like, "Well at least he didn't go through such and so," as they began the story of their daughter's or son's illness. We probably did exactly the same thing. It wasn't ever meant to be cruel or dismissive, but it reflects some deep reality that we all suffer alone. Everyone's suffering is the worst ever, and no one can ever understand it because no one's been through it the way I do. It's helpful to remember that, so you don't give up on the importance of company even if others don't give you all the sympathy you deserve. I tell you this to remind you that the point of companionship is not sympathy, but strength. Put up with others if you have to, because the strength and the gift will come.

Using discipline in our thinking became an essential step in mental health for us. We all suffer from a phenomena where we immediately jump to worst case thinking. We do it especially well in stress, but we can do it at any time. I get a headache. Worst case thinking is, "It's probably a tumor." I told you I only knew two people who had had Crohn's, and they both suffered badly with it. I learned, though, that Crohns has a variety of manifestations, and that most people learn to live with the illness for mostly healthy long lives. So one of the first things we did was start to take control of our thinking to talk ourselves out of worst case thinking.

Praying was a vital part of keeping our life together. Prayers can be answered in specific and responsive ways, but most of the time prayer is the act of seeking our own resonance with God. We did not pray only so God would change Chris's health for the better. We prayed because we knew prayer was the well of spiritual strength we needed to keep drinking from. As St. Paul said to Timothy in our second reading, "But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength. The Lord rescued me from the lion's mouth."

Another helpful tool is thank you lists. Not thank you notes, although those are always great. Thank you lists are mental exercises we do to take stock of all the things for which we could be thankful. When worst case scenario thinking, and even depressive "this will never get better" thinking sets in, just force yourself as quickly as you can to

start thinking of things you're grateful for. Even if it feels like you're just going through the motions, you will find that this exercise might just save you from going into a full depression, and it might help pull you out of one.

Finally, I talked about how helpful it was for us to help others. Helping others reinforces gratitude, and it helps us recognize that we are making progress in our own journey. As we dealt with Chris's disease, our energy to help others let us recognize how much we had learned, and it triggered those feel good chemicals that are associated with doing good deeds for others.

At that church I left when Chris's disease was starting, we had worked with an artist to create an image of Christ as bold as our own Christus Rex. But in the image created for Church of the Good Shepherd in Federal Way, Washington, the Cross shape is very large. The image of Christ does not sit apart from the cross, but his figure is emerging from the cross. Christ is not robed in royal gowns and crowned as ours is, but he is mostly naked, draped only in the burial cloth that still clings to his resurrecting form. The wounds are there in his hands and feet.

It is an image of Christ coming to resurrection in the midst of the cross, not apart from it. It is Christ standing in the midst of the cross that is no longer his, but yours. It may help to remember, as you face your own cross, whatever it is, that Christ is already there, already bringing it into the resurrection, with you in mind.

Please, God, give us the courage and faith to remain close to you. Help us to trust our impulses to help others, knowing that you will provide all we need, and more.