

When it comes to preparing sermons, some weeks are harder than others. This past week it has been pretty tough. I began the week with a funeral for Eunice Albright's sister-in-law, Alice Carter.

Then there were a lot of distractions, good distractions but distractions none-the-less. We've sold all the old radiators from the church outright except two, and got a lot more money than we would have received from them for scrap metal. That was good, but it also meant me answering the telephone, making appointments, giving directions, showing and pricing radiators, and helping people load them on their trucks.

The church continues to be a hub of activity with the installation of the new heating system that began on Friday, and as we rehearse for the Liberty cantata this fall, and as Betty Jane makes preparation to begin the hand chime choir. There is a lot more work involved in that than I ever imagined, including the construction of a new closet in the annex to house her stuff. My office has become the temporary abode for everything that is in Betty Jane's way that she doesn't know what to do with. All in all, the annex looks like it suffered an earthquake, maybe 5.5 or so on the Richter scale.

But far and away the hardest thing about this past week, and the thing that made it most difficult to concentrate, was the latest e-mail update from Karyn Espenlaub, regarding the condition of her niece, Julie Biddle. Julie's brain tumor is aggressive, relentless, and unresponsive to any treatments that are available. The doctors give her no hope of survival, and are talking of her survival in terms of days and weeks rather than months or years.

This puts me in a spot that I don't find myself in very often. I find myself questioning God's will and God's ability. I find myself asking the same questions I'm sure Julie's family is asking, if God is good and if God is all powerful, then why must Julie suffer and die? What about God's promise that the followers of Jesus would lay hands on the sick and/or anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord and they will get well? What about having faith even as small as a mustard seed, and two or three agreeing in prayer, and Jesus' promise that those who believe on Him would be able to do the things He did and greater things because He was going to the

Father and would send the Holy Spirit?

My spirit is troubled within me: so many "ifs," "what abouts," and "whys?" The truth is, I think, I'm angry. I do believe God has the power to heal Julie; I just don't understand why He hasn't. Or maybe He's just waiting until now, waiting until all human efforts and solutions have been exhausted. If the healing were to come now, there could be no question that it was a miracle.

We do see this sort of thing in Scripture: He gave Isaac to Abraham and Sarah *after* they had visited all the fertility clinics available to them and were naturally too old to have children. He told Gideon to trim down his army to 300 men *before* going to battle against the Midianites and their allies many thousands strong. Jesus healed the woman who suffered with constant bleeding *after* she had spent all her money on the physicians who did her more harm than good. Sometimes God does reveal His mighty arm *only after* every other hope has been depleted so that there can be no misunderstanding about its source. It's certainly not the time to quit praying for Julie. This is the opportune time for God to show His stuff. But what if He doesn't?

James tells us that "the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective," but maybe I'm not righteous enough? Maybe our faith is not strong enough? Shall I shake my fist at God and question Him or should I despise the man in the mirror for not having sufficient faith? We want to avoid this valley of death and well of grief, but what if God calls us to go through the valley and requires us to languish in the well instead? I feel so helpless and so powerless and that makes me feel afraid and angry. I don't know about you, but I don't like to feel so out of control, so vulnerable, and weak. I don't like it one bit. I suspect that you don't like it much either.

But then again, as ugly and as frustrating as our present condition and circumstances are, I can't help feeling that we are probably closer to the Lord now than ever. As hard as it is, there is something terribly real and honest about where we've landed, and that's a good thing. God will not tolerate hypocrisy or dishonesty in any form. He requires us to mean business with Him and to seek Him with our whole hearts. He wants us to come to that spiritual maturity expressed in Habbakuk 3:17-18 where the prophet says,

"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. He wants us to come to that spiritual maturity expressed by Job in Job 13:15, where he says of God "though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." Authentic faith is found when the chips are down, not when everything is to our liking.

There is a line in the hymn, "Open My Eyes That I May See," that says, "Open my ears, that I may hear voices of truth thou sendest clear; and while the wavenotes fall on my ear, everything false will disappear." We find ourselves at a place where all games have ended and pretense gone. Life presents itself all the more precious because of its frailty and death claims to have the last word. We stand before these forces this morning small and all exposed, wondering if God has an answer to death's challenge to His sovereignty?

The apostle Paul dealt with some of this in our Scripture lesson this morning. First he gives testimony about a vision he received from the Lord: On the one hand, such a vision was a great faith-builder; but, on the other hand, it was an invitation to spiritual pride. He says in II Corinthians 12:5, ". . . I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses." He goes on to say in verses 7-9: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."

Ultimately our struggles have one purpose and that is to bring us to the right place before God, and that is a place of absolute humility before Him and an absolute dependency upon His grace. I cannot save myself or anyone else from sin; and I cannot save myself or anyone else from dying. As much as I would like to, I cannot wave a magic wand or pour magic oil over Julie to save her life and to spare her family from sorrow. I cannot. I hate to admit it, but I have no magic and I cannot. I want to come to the rescue but I cannot. Unless the Lord intervenes, I cannot. As another

hymn writer puts it this way, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die."

This is the place we must come to and my job is to tell you this and not let you embrace false hopes or trust in false gods of your own making. We must let go of our need to control everything and to see everything before we will believe. We need to hear this simple promise of Scripture as the very word of God: God says to us through II Corinthians 12:3: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

We need to grasp this simple truth: God's grace is sufficient. The miracle we are looking for is in this: His grace is sufficient. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death: **His grace is sufficient for me.**

In the book, Made to Count*, that we are reading in our Promise Keeper's Group Wednesday evenings, former congressman from Oklahoma and former chairman of the House Republican Committee, J.C. Watts, writes of his ministry as a Christian congressman and what he says sounds a lot like what I am called to do as a pastor: Watts writes, "At times like the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 or the tornadoes of 1999, what can you say that's going to help? I was their congressman, but during that time I was also a Christian friend there to love them and care for them and cry with them. That was my mission."

Watts says something else that I believe to be accurate for all of us. He talks about what it means to seek God's will:

"When you are sensitive to God's will for your life and you are honest and naked before God, there are some things that you're going to want to do and God's not going to want you to do them. But if you say to God, 'I'm willing to accept *whatever* your will is,' that's when you see God move mountains. That's when you see divine intervention. The trouble people get in is that they want to do things so badly and get so emotionally involved. When the Lord says, 'No, J. C., that's not where I want you, that's not what I want you to do,' that's when I'm tempted to take out the spiritual crowbar and try to pry the door open. And when we walk through

those doors we see that God had nothing to do with it. But if you're open and sensitive to God's will for your life and you're willing to accept; God's saying yes or no, mighty things happen when God is in the process."

I am still believing God for a miracle for Julie Biddle and her family, but I realize that I cannot control or dictate the form in which that miracle will come. He can bring physical healing even now; though it is not possible for man; everything is possible with God. He can also give Julie and her family, and us, comfort in the valley of the shadow of death, and He can give them and us the ability to believe in the resurrection of the dead and the certainty of heaven's promise, should Julie die.

Julie grew up in this church and is a member of our family, and as her spiritual family I'm going to ask us to do one thing together on her behalf this morning. I want us to give her to God and to say to God: "God You are good and we are willing to accept Your will for Julie *whatever* it may be." Let's just give her and her family to the Lord and ask Him to do what He knows is best.

And, maybe there is something going on in your life right now or in the life of someone very close to you. And, maybe you have been telling God what He must do for you or for them. Perhaps you need to get out of the way in that circumstance too. Maybe you need to rest your trust in the Lord and say to Him: "**Father in Heaven, I am willing to accept *whatever* Your will is.**" You may want to pray that prayer right now.

It's the hardest thing in the world to let go of our own wills and our own dreams and to trust God for something better, but here is the thing we need to remember: He says to us, even as He said to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for My power is made perfect in weakness." **His grace is also sufficient for you and me.**

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Sermon for August 31, 2008

Sufficient Grace II Corinthians 12:1-10

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