

Rev. Dr. Bill Smutz  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood  
*“Long Distance Healing”*  
Sunday, August 15, 2021

***Psalm 22:1-5, 14-15, 19-21***

*To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.*

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

*Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*

*O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;*

*and by night, but find no rest.*

*Yet you are holy,*

*enthroned on the praises of Israel.*

*In you our ancestors trusted;*

*they trusted, and you delivered them.*

*To you they cried, and were saved;*

*in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.*

*I am poured out like water,*

*and all my bones are out of joint;*

*my heart is like wax;*

*it is melted within my breast;*

*my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,*

*and my tongue sticks to my jaws;*

*you lay me in the dust of death.*

*But you, O LORD, do not be far away!*

*O my help, come quickly to my aid!*

*Deliver my soul from the sword,*

*my life from the power of the dog!*

*Save me from the mouth of the lion!*

*From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.*

***Luke 5: 17-26***

*One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then some men came, carrying a paralysed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus; but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven you.’ Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, ‘Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, “Your sins are forgiven you”, or to say, “Stand up and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins’—he said to the one who was paralysed—‘I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your*

*home.' Immediately he stood up before them, took what he had been lying on, and went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'*

In the church where I grew up, Bibles were given to us in third grade. There was a special ceremony in the chapel of the church on a Sunday afternoon, and we were each presented with our own Bible. For many of us, it was our first significant book that we had. And this Bible came with some pictures, not a lot, but some. And one of the pictures was of our gospel lesson of-- of friends who had dug a hole in a roof, which seemed really cool to me in third grade and-- and let their friend down through. And so let us hear our gospel lesson today from the fifth chapter of Luke. "One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting by. They had come from every village of Galilee and Judah and from Jerusalem and the power of the Lord was with him to heal. Just then, some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a bed. They were trying to bring him in and lay him before Jesus but finding no way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the middle of the crowd in front of Jesus. When he saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven.' Then the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, 'Who is this who is speaking blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?' When Jesus perceived their questions, he answered them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your heart? Which is it easier to say, your sins are forgiven you or to say stand up and walk?' But so that you may know that the son of man has authority on Earth to forgive sins, he said to the one who was paralyzed, 'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go home.' Immediately, the man stood up before them, took what he'd been laid on, and went-- went to his home, glorifying God. Amazement seized all of them and they glorified God and were filled with awe saying, 'We have seen strange things today.'" This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen. Now, last Sunday, I shared that I was going to offer the sermon in the form of a story throughout the month of August and-- and when I go into story mode, I like to-- to visit the fictional town of Perseverance, Missouri, which exists, in my mind, just a stone's throw east of Kirksville and somewhere north and west of Hannibal. Perseverance Presbyterian Church is-- is the oldest and largest church in this town of 12 thousand souls or so and is where I imagine myself to serve as pastor. It's also helpful today to know that Winston College, a small Presbyterian-related liberal arts school, was founded through the energies of the pastor and congregation of Perseverance Presbyterian in the 1870s and--and is a significant institution in the community.

This past week at Perseverance Presbyterian has been one of those you just want to forget. In fact, I haven't been through a week like this at a church in over 20 years, since the faraway days when I was still an associate pastor. Back then, in a two-week period, there were seven member deaths at the church where I was serving. Some expected, the end of a long struggle with cancer, and some not expected, a random plane crash in Antarctica of all places. All these endings randomly piled on top of one another, plus the death of my 90-year-old grandmother, and then all of that concluding with the birth of our youngest child. Overwhelming barely begins to describe the experience of those two weeks. It got to the point where nobody in the church office wanted to pick up a ringing phone, not wanting to hear another teary voice sharing more heartbreaking news, not able to absorb the pain and the loss of another cherished saint of the church, another dear friend. That's the kind of week it's been here at Perseverance Presbyterian, and to be honest, I'm quite numb.

It started this past Monday with a call from Mary. Could she and George come and see me right away about something that was tearing them apart? Fifteen minutes later, the three of us were sitting around the little table in my office. Mary kept looking at George, silently imploring him to start the conversation. But George just stared into space looking lost, his face radiating pain. Mary finally broke the silence with a torrent of words and emotions that spilled forth from her like the explosion of water from a ruptured dam. Their two children, Brandon and Tom, each from a different coast, had flown into Des Moines and together driven the 140 miles or so to Perseverance in a rental car, all for George's 70th birthday celebration.

The festive weekend had gone very well, but then it turned ugly, Mary said, when she and George got onto their boys - her words, "got onto them" - during Sunday breakfast. Why were they living so far away? Why were they not getting married? Why were they not providing grandchildren for them? These accusations caused Tom and Brandon to explode, angrily responding that they lived so far away to avoid such emotional abuse, and that there would never be grandchildren because there would never be marriages, because they did not want to live the bitterness that their parents shared.

All the screaming and accusations that followed ended with the boys squealing out of the driveway in the rental car, headed back to Des Moines hours before their scheduled departure while their parents stood weeping in the front yard. Neither Mary nor George had done anything more than doze for nearly 30 hours when they arrived in my office and they had spent a lot of that time since the boys had left, angrily accusing each other of ruining their family. Their hurt sucked so much oxygen out of my office that even I was having trouble breathing. I didn't say anything for a long time. No words seemed appropriate before such brokenness. Now, just about everybody in the church suspected that life for George and Mary was not as happy and carefree as they made it seem to be, but no one had any idea how completely they were consumed by bitterness and despair that was now on full display in front of me. The only thing I could do-- I could think to do is pick up the phone and call my friend Steve Frye, who is a professor of psychology at Winston College here in town. Steve is my go-to person-- my go-to referral when more than prayer or presence is needed. With the speaker on, I explained to Steve, who was with me, and talked about the pain they were in. Luckily, Monday is Steve's light teaching day this semester and he agreed to immediately see them. I walked Mary and George out to their car, praying as they drove off that they might find enough peace to get through the next 24 hours. The next shoe of this week dropped about 9:30 Tuesday evening, I was at home sitting in my favorite chair, several chapters into the latest Bruno, chief of police, murder mystery when the phone rang. Kendall Harris identified himself and informed me that it was time. His mother, Harriet, a 73-year member of the church, had been in hospice care for the past three weeks. I stopped by the house as often as I could to pray with Harriet and to visit the different family members who were there keeping watch as their schedules allowed. I asked Kendall to let me know when death was imminent and promised to come and share her passing with them. When I arrived, everyone was gathered around Harriet's hospital bed set up in the dining room. Her breathing was shallow and labored. We sang Harriet's favorite hymn, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing. The words of verse two are so appropriate. Here I pause in my sojourning, giving thanks for having come. Come to trust at every turning God will guide me safely home. Jesus sought me when a stranger wandering from the fold of God. Came to rescue me from danger, blessed body, precious blood. Next, I read the twenty-third Psalm, and then we shared the Lord's Prayer together. It wasn't 30 minutes later that Harriet's breathing stopped completely. The hospice nurse who had been hovering around the edges of the room, checked her vitals and quietly informed us that Harriet was gone. I asked everyone to come and gather around the bed again and to grab hands and that those two people on either side of the bed at the top closest to Harriet, that they would put a hand on her shoulder. And spanning an age from 10 to 83, we took turns telling Harriet stories. Some of the stories made us laugh and we cried. Some of the stories just made us cry, but each shared memory deepened our love and respect and sense of loss for this child of God. It was a sacred time. We were standing on holy ground. Harriet was on the search committee that had called me to Perseverance Presbyterian some 15 years ago now, the first person, in fact, from the church that I ever spoke to. Over the years, we've become great friends, and she's been a huge support and a blunt voice of wisdom when I needed it most. We'll celebrate her life and bury her in the graveyard behind the church early next week, but I can't think beyond my personal sense of loss right now, though I know I'll have to get over that before the service. Harriet wouldn't be pleased to have us making much of a fuss over her in the first place, but she'd be even less happy if her pastor was wallowing in personal sorrow instead of proclaiming God's gift, the good news of Jesus resurrection.

My hope that the rest of the week would pass quickly and quietly came crashing down late Thursday afternoon when Owen knocked on the door and stuck his head in my office. "Do you have a minute?" he asked. Owen, who is chair of the Board of Deacons, the church's main caring ministry group. Owen was coming from his doctor's office and was due home to have dinner with his wife Sandy and their children, Keaton, who is 10 and Cassie, who is 12. Owen grinned at me and then

lowered his eyes, and in a barely audible whisper said the pain he'd been having in his abdomen had just been diagnosed as pancreatic cancer and that while there were treatment options, the doctor said the disease was pretty advanced. "What do I do?" he said. "How do I tell Sandy? What do we tell the kids? What will their futures be like? I'm scared. I'm not ready to die. Can Jesus heal me like He did the man you talked about last Sunday, the one whose friends lowered him down through the roof in front of Jesus?"

Questions and statements came tumbling out of Owen with a desperation born of a newfound urgency and fear. Again, I didn't have any words. It seems to me that a pastor who goes silent when the going gets tough isn't of much use, but there really are no words in such a moment. So I simply walked over to Owen and put my arms around him and held him close. I don't know how long our embrace lasted. At some point, I became aware that, because of our shaking, we were both crying. In all candor, these are the moments where my faith is most confused and challenged, where being a disciple of Jesus sometimes seems nearly pointless. I want to be able to lift Owen up with a proclamation of faith that all will be well and that Jesus is watching over him and will heal him and keep his family from every pain and any loss but my experiences in life urged me to be more pragmatic, to acknowledge that oftentimes the healing and wholeness which God provides us is found beyond the bounds of this world. I don't know why life is this way, don't like that life is this way. I wish I had answers, answers for Owen and his family for the hard questions that will be rightfully asked by others within the church, answers for myself. In such broken moments, I find myself clinging to what the apostle Paul says at the end of his great chapter on Love in 1 Corinthians.

"Now, I see in the mirror dimly," says Paul, "but then I will see face-to-face. Now, I know only in part," he continues, "then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known, the clarity with which I want to see, and the list of questions I have for God grows longer every year, and the anger I sometimes feel deepens towards rage more often than I care to admit." Like ancient Israel's King David, who has said to have written Psalm 22, I feel like I would cry to the Lord, but often receive no answer or rest, while at the very same time knowing that the Lord is never far away and journeys with me, journeys with all of us, even through the valley of the shadow of death. But sometimes I just want positive answers and happy endings. Sometimes I want Jesus simply to say, "Be well and change everything." The same questions, the same desires, and the same anger filled Sandy's and Owen's eyes and hearts at their kitchen table the next morning where we sat after the kids had gone off to school. The best I could offer them is that they won't be alone on the road before them. All of us, all of us in their church community, will journey with them, searching for answers together, enjoying the good days, enduring the bad days, loving them without question and without end.

After all this, there was a moment of grace and some heartwarming perspective on this terrible week that came in unexpectedly on Saturday morning, beginning with a text from our daughter-in-law in Omaha. Four-year-old granddaughter Bobbie had gotten a splinter in one of her toes. The text asked if we could call Bobbie and let her tell us the story of the mighty splinter. A few minutes later, a tearful Bobbie answered our call and proceeded to tell us all about how she got the splinter and how it is now gone, but how her toe still hurt. When her dad and his brothers were growing up and experienced similar temporary pain, my usual response, being that kind of father, was to offer to go to the kitchen and get a big knife and cut off the offending finger or toe, so it would stop hurting. Of course, I was not serious, but the protest to dad's, silly idea usually provided enough distraction for the pain to magically disappear. I made a similar offer to Bobbie, which, of course, was immediately followed by a stream of protest. So I offered that she and her grandmother-- that her grandmother and I could sing a song to her toe and make it better. Another offer that Bobbie also rebuffed. Before quickly changing her mind and deciding that we could sing Jesus Loves Me to her toe. When we started singing Jesus Loves Bobbie, this I know, she immediately stopped us and with a scolding tone, informed us that we were singing it wrong, and then she started singing it with us so that we would get it right. When we finished the song, Bobby yelled with great excitement to her mom in the next room, that the singing had made her toe all better. After we said goodbye to Bobbie and told her we loved her and had hung

up, I headed for church to work on the sermon and to make sure that the sanctuary was ready for worship the next day.

But so far, I've only managed to sit here in the sanctuary last pew in the balcony, my favorite thinking place in the whole world. I've been pondering the fragile nature of our humanness, wishing that the healing to all of us so regularly need could be as simple and as straightforward as singing a song. My mind also wandered back to last week's sermon, the one that Owen had mentioned, which was built upon the gospel story of the friends who lowered the companion, the paralyzed man, through the roof to Jesus. Luke's brevity in telling the story makes it sound like accessing healing is a simple task - remove a few roof tiles, lower someone into a room, and it's done - but through my sermon prep reading, I'd learned that the roof of a typical house in the region where Jesus was traveling at that time would have been thick and hard. Tools and much time would have been required to open the roof, making a huge amount of noise and mess. I chuckled to myself as I realized that noisy and messy is a great description for the work of caring for people. Great friends, an entire community, have to be committed to each other and those in need in order to engage the many possibilities which Jesus can and does bring to every situation.

This realization still didn't provide the answers I wanted for Mary and George and their boys, for Harriet's family, for Owen and Sandy and Keaton and Cassie, for Bobbie, for myself, for all who suffer and seek healing of any kind. But the notion that only a community can together begin to access the resources of our faith for the common good, for the care and well-being of each other--this is something to ponder further. This is an idea, rich, with the blessings of God. This is something that everyone, without exception, at Perseverance Presbyterian can participate in.